

## still life

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# still life

by [meridies](#)

## Summary

When Tommy drops out of school and runs away from home at seventeen, he only has one destination in mind: his older cousin Techno's apartment. He has no idea what he wants to do with his life once he arrives, but everything changes when he begins working at a secondhand bookstore owned by Wilbur Soot. Slowly but surely, Tommy learns to love the town and the people around him, and learns how to change their lives as well.

## Notes

this started off as a short exercise in my fiction class on developing place and time within a story, though it's grown a fair bit beyond that. also, i know it's absurdly long, but there was no good place to split it for chapters and it felt better as a oneshot, which is why it stayed in one piece.

think of this as a study in character, not a study in plot.

content warnings for depression, implied abuse, implied past alcoholism, and a referenced past suicide attempt. that makes the fic sound a lot darker than it is, but as always, take care and enjoy <3

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

It was a bright, clear afternoon when Tommy left.

He arrived at the bus station in Augusta just as the sky changed from pale, wispy blue to orange. It had been a long process to get there. He had left when the night was young and had stayed awake the entire time. By the time he had purchased his next bus ticket, the sky was smeared with deep indigo. He sat down heavily on one of the benches outside the station and considered the last bits of money tucked away in his pocket. The calculations ran through his head. It had been a six dollar bus ticket from the station at Second and Meridian St. to here, and he had just spent another seven dollars on his second ride. That left him with only fifteen dollars in savings. Fifteen dollars wasn't much at all.

But his stomach was churning something fierce. Tommy wasted another two dollars and forty cents on an Italian sub from the corner store across the street, and impulsively bought a coffee for fifty cents. He sat cross-legged at the bus station while the cars passed by. Even though he knew precisely where he was, and knew precisely where he was going, something inside him still felt deeply lost.

The bus arrived before the second hour was up. Tommy wrapped up the other half of the sub for later and boarded. The sky was deep black, splattered with stars. He let his eyes unfocus, and he let himself fall asleep.

He woke up in Baileyville, Maine.

Tommy had never been to Baileyville, Maine before. He supposed there was a first time for everything. The bus dropped him off at the smallest station Tommy had ever seen, and drove away before Tommy could ask for directions. He stared around at the small downtown— full of shuttered windows, papered up walls, and empty sidewalks. It seemed that Baileyville was a dying town.

Tommy shouldered his duffel bag and trekked onwards.

It took him more than a few wrong turns before he made his way to his destination, but he arrived there regardless. The address was burned into his mind. He stopped at the base of the apartment complex and stared up at the building, folded into the sky like an accordion. The front door was locked, but there was a buzzer system beside it. Tommy hoped it wasn't too early to announce his presence. He pressed it.

An unknown, sleep-rough voice answered. "Hello?"

"Hello." Tommy cleared his throat, suddenly nervous. His voice was hoarse. "Uh, does Technoblade still live here?"

There was a pause. "Who are you?"

"I'm Tommy," he said. His voice hadn't gotten any clearer. "I'm Techno's younger cousin. Sort of. Distantly related, I guess. I think so, at least. We met once at Great-Aunt Jessie's seventy-fifth birthday party, maybe ten years ago, and he told me I could come over if I ever

needed anything. He gave me his address. But I wasn't at any of the reunions ever since, so I don't have his number or email or anything. I was in this blue button up and those black shiny shoes— I got them all muddy. He'll remember me if he's still there. If you ask."

Tommy clamped his mouth shut before the rest of the words could flood out. That was the most he had spoken in months. He shifted the strap of his duffel bag around his shoulder and stared at the blinking red light of the intercom. A stone grew in his chest. There was silence until the voice came through the intercom again.

"Come on up," the person offered. "Techno's not here right now, but he'll be back soon. I'll be making breakfast in a bit, and you're welcome to have some."

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Tommy didn't recognize the man who unlocked the door for him, but he introduced himself as Phil, and let Tommy use the bathroom. Tommy took in the whole apartment when he was washed up. For all Phil's awkward talk about how messy it was as he showed Tommy around, he couldn't help but think that it was cleaner than home— not home. Cleaner than his last room. The apartment was a lot bigger than he had expected, so large that someone had put up three-quarter walls dividing the room into thirds, so there were two separate bedrooms and one living room. Big windows lined the wall, looking out onto the highway. Cars flickered by in the low dawn light.

"Techno's at work right now," Phil informed him, "He never mentioned you."

Not many people mentioned Tommy. That didn't surprise him. Phil continued, "You said you were his younger cousin?"

Tommy nodded. "Third cousin twice removed or— or some shit like that." He winced. "Sorry. Something like that."

"I don't mind if you swear," dismissed Phil. "Guess Techno's hiding more than I thought. Fuckin' bastard," he added, but it was fond. "Feel free to take a seat, or make yourself at home. Where'd you come from?"

"Boston."

Phil whistled. "That's far. Are you here on your own?"

Tommy nodded. He ran through the story he had concocted in his head over the last twenty-four hours of bus rides and hitchhiking, but Phil didn't press anymore. He only tilted his head towards the duffel. "You can put that down, you know."

Tommy's grip on the strap loosened for the first time in hours, and he let it fall onto the futon. The cushions were soft enough to swallow the bag whole. He glanced around the apartment and tried to sense his cousin's presence, though he didn't remember much of him. It had been

years, after all, and everything he remembered was tinged with the sepia-wash of old memories. But there on the wall was a picture of someone he recognized— Techno's face, grinning, arm slung over a much younger Phil.

"I know," Phil said, when he followed Tommy's gaze. "He looks so much younger there. Weird, right?"

Tommy didn't want to tell him that this was the only image of Techno he held in his mind. "How long ago was that?"

"Back when we first moved in," Phil said, "Six years or so? Probably longer."

Tommy dragged his gaze away from the image. "Do you know when Techno will be back?"

"He's on the night shift all this week. He probably won't be back until seven. You got here really fuckin' early, you know. You're lucky I was awake."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. You needed a place. Techno offered, here you are."

"Sorry," Tommy repeated again, but Phil laughed, one of those whole-bellied chuckles that made the tension dissolve.

"I was about to make breakfast anyway," he said. "Eggs and toast. I can fry up some potatoes if you want them too. Are you hungry?"

Tommy was but he shook his head. Phil took out the potatoes anyway and set about heating up some slowly-hissing oil in a pan. Nausea coiled inside of him.

"Never been a big fan of cooking myself," Phil said. He was speaking mostly to himself. Tommy was silent and only stared at the motions. "This is breakfast for me but dinner for Techno. Night shifts aren't great, but at least we get a meal together before I have to go to work."

He was interrupted by the sound of the front door unlocking and opening. It swung open, and the man who entered hung his coat on the rack and set about unlacing big, black boots with brisk movements. All the while he complained, "Phil, you wouldn't believe the night I've had — I'm telling you, I'm so sick of—"

He turned. His words shriveled up. In hushed recognition, Technoblade breathed, "Tommy?"

"Hi," Tommy answered sheepishly. "Sorry for the short notice."

Techno stared, hands frozen, before blinking as if remembering where he was. "You've gotten taller," he said, and stepped out of his boots. "How old are you now? Sixteen?"

"Seventeen and a half."

"Huh."

“I didn’t have your number anymore. I would have called you.”

“Ever heard of a phone directory?” He pushed past Phil and helped himself to a slice of browned, almost blackened toast. “I might’ve been able to pick you up. How’d you get here?”

“Took the bus,” Tommy said. He traced the path in the air with his fingers. “I hitchhiked for parts of it and took the Concord line. Then I walked from the stop to here.”

“That’s a long way,” Phil said quietly.

“So why’re you here now? Is everything alright?”

“Long story,” Tommy said. Techno stood expectantly, and Tommy tried to say it nicely but all the words were jumbled in his mouth. It was one thing to tell his history teacher, the only person who had ever really supported him, and who had been expecting it this whole time. It was another thing to shout it at his mother and leave before she could force him to stay. But it was an entirely new thing to say, almost an insurmountable challenge, to the guy he had met at ten, who had crouched down so he was at Tommy’s height and told him in all strength and seriousness *you ever need someplace safe to go, come to me. I don’t care when.*

He swallowed the memory like a stone. “I dropped out yesterday. I walked out of my house right after. I didn’t have anywhere else to go so I came here.”

Phil let out a low whistle. Techno’s eyebrows lifted. “You dropped out?”

“Long time in the making,” he muttered.

“So what’s your plan now? Getting your GED?”

Tommy shrugged.

“How long are you planning on staying?”

Another shrug. “If you’ll let me.” It was the polite way of saying *as long as possible*.

Phil let out another slow sigh while Techno frowned. He reached for another piece of toast and piled it high with scrambled egg. Phil took the potatoes off the heat and tipped them into a bowl. He and Techno made eye contact with each other and had a silent, wordless conversation communicated only through eyes. Tommy shifted uneasily.

After nearly a minute of silence, Techno pushed a plate full of food towards Tommy. “Well,” he said, a stilted acceptance, “If you’re staying here, you might as well eat.”

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Tommy slept through the whole first day and woke up late at night after both Techno and Phil had eaten dinner. He poked through the fridge until he came up with decent-looking leftovers and heated them up as silently as possible in the microwave. He ate them with a plastic fork sitting cross-legged on the futon until his stomach turned. Then he fell back asleep.

The next day was a little different. He settled into a better sleep schedule, one that didn't crush his Circadian rhythm. Phil tended to work days and Techno tended to work nights, so Tommy saw bits and pieces of both of them throughout the day. He ate a bowl of dry cereal and went for a walk. Then he fell asleep, and woke up, and the third day went about the same. One whole week passed, and no call came from his parents or from the state. Another week passed. Techno got a reprieve from night shifts—he worked as a warehouse guard for long, twelve hour chunks of time—and Phil worked as a manager at some furniture store. There were times when Tommy was alone for the whole day. Then there were times when all three of them were crushed together in the same small apartment.

And then there was a time when Techno said, "Tommy, you need to get out more. Have you thought about getting a job?"

Tommy could hardly object. He knew that he was about as big a burden as one could get—he'd been told that enough times in his life. Techno's voice was casual but firm, so Tommy nodded.

Most of his pocket money and savings came from yard work and other scrounged-up jobs along the side. Once while the teacher leading detention had left the room to use the bathroom, Tommy had riffled through his wallet to emerge with three twenties and a five. He needed the money more than the teacher, he reasoned. He was building his savings. But he had never applied for an actual job, and he had never received an actual paycheck. Phil sat down with him one afternoon and helped him put together the saddest looking resume Tommy had ever seen. He didn't even have a high school diploma to put on it. Even Phil thought it was sad, because he winced and then tried to pretend like he hadn't.

"We'll take you to Main Street tomorrow and you can pass it around," said Phil. "We know a lot of people there. Someone will be kind enough to take you."

"We could introduce him to Will," Techno said, "There's always room at second chances."

That made Tommy bristle, which made Techno laugh. "Second Chances is a bookstore. Wilbur owns it. He's a great guy, you'll see when you meet him."

"I'm not really a book guy." Tommy had, of course, flunked out of nearly every class he took.

"No one's saying you have to read them. Just gotta shelve them and— don't know what else people do at bookstores."

"Give recommendations," Phil said, mouth full.

Techno agreed, "That too. But you can lie about recommendations and no one cares. Come on, Wilbur's cool. I think he'll like you."

The next day Tommy wore his nicest shirt, a navy one with no wrinkles. It was halfway through October now and it was getting colder each day. The sultry, humid summer days were long gone. Tommy got the chance to get a good look at Baileyville as Techno drove him to Main Street in a small, busted up sedan. It seemed a lot smaller now that he wasn't walking through it at the crack of dawn. All the buildings were steeped, blue or green with the occasional white-washed wall, and honeycombed through the streets. Tall deciduous trees clouded the sky overhead. Eventually Techno turned down a street that was slightly bigger than the rest. That was Main Street, he said. He pointed to a small, brown hole-in-the-wall front. That was Second Chances.

Wilbur Soot turned out to be a lanky, tall guy with knobby wrists and hair that refused to stay in one place. He was wearing corduroy pants and a black sweater and round glasses that reminded Tommy of his previous history teacher. Wilbur's glasses were smudged with fingerprints. Tommy hardly knew how he saw through them.

Wilbur leapt up from the chair behind the register at the front of the bookstore and approached Techno when the two of them walked through the door. He put one hand on Techno's shoulder and Techno did the same. It was a bare touch. Tommy got the sense that he was witnessing the closest thing to a hug either man was willing to give.

"Tech," Wilbur said easily, "How are you?"

"I've been better. I'm calling in my favor."

"Oh? This had better be something good."

Techno tilted his chin in Tommy's direction. "This is Tommy. He needs a job."

Wilbur's gaze flicked over. "I don't need an employee."

"Please," Techno said. The word sounded like it pained him. "After this, favor's over. You won't owe me anymore."

"Never liked owing you in the first place," muttered Wilbur. He turned to Tommy. "I'll give you a tour, how about that? It's a maze."

Tommy half-heartedly shrugged. Wilbur stared blankly back, muttered something under his breath, before delving down one of the side hallways. Tommy followed. Though it seemed small from the outside, the hallways of Second Chances unfolded like fern leaves, exploding and twisting in every possible direction. Some hallways were narrow enough that two people would have to press right up against each other to pass through. Some hallways turned into windowless rooms full of shelves and books in languages Tommy had never heard of. Other hallways turned into twisting, winding staircases that led into blank walls or old, grey movie posters. Each step creaked beneath Tommy's feet like the wood was inches away from giving out on him. It was winding and unending.

Each corner, every turn, every position possible was filled with towering bookshelves half-again as tall as Tommy, running all the way to the ceiling. He could smell the books, their pages, the words within, all musty and damp like the ground itself had been soaked with



coffee and dew. For a blistering moment Tommy could remember early mornings as a child. His father, brewing coffee by the stove. The sound of the beans grinding each morning. He hung suspended in that memory, each step cautious, as he turned down the next corner.

“Confusing at first, I know.” Wilbur was following right behind him. “But you’ll get the hang of it soon enough.”

“I wouldn’t get lost,” Tommy said. “Too smart for that.”

“I’ll be damned. He speaks.”

“Only quiet when I wanna be.”

A delighted laugh burst from Wilbur’s chest. “And he’s got an attitude. Funny. Tommy, are you funny?”

“Dunno,” Tommy said. “Why do you care? Is this a job interview or some shit?”

Wilbur appraised him, then called out. “Techno, where did you find this kid?”

Techno’s voice responded from the other side of the bookstore. “We’re related. Third cousin once removed. He’s from *that* side of the family.”

Tommy wasn’t sure why Techno had said *that* side, as if it were the wrong side to be on, as if it were a brand of shame. But Wilbur’s face flattened out into understanding. There was a new appraisal in his gaze when he looked at Tommy.

Hastily, Tommy fumbled for the resume he had put together and entirely forgotten. “I have this.”

Wilbur scanned over it and tore it in half. Tommy’s chest tightened. Wilbur tore it into quarters, then turned on his heel and beckoned for Tommy to follow. The winding hallway they were in led right back to the front door, heavy and wooden. Techno was waiting there, reading through a book picked at random.

“Consider the favor paid for,” Wilbur said.

“Appreciate it,” Techno said to Wilbur, “Have fun,” he said to Tommy next, and finally to both of them, “Meet me at the coffee shop when you’re done.”

Without waiting for a response he pushed his way through the door. Tommy watched him vanish down Main Street and had the distinct feeling he had witnessed a silent conversation happen right underneath his very nose, with no idea what had been communicated. He turned to Wilbur, brow furrowed. “What’s the favor that you two are talking about?”

Wilbur crossed his arms. He kept his voice light and casual, though Tommy could hear vines wrapping themselves around his vocal chords. “Well, that depends on which one of us you talk to.”

“I’m asking you.”

“Techno found me drunk out of my mind and bleeding out on the floor. He took me to the hospital. Probably wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t helped me out.”

Tommy was disconcerted. “That doesn’t seem like a favor. Isn’t that just— human decency?”

“Techno works in mysterious ways.” Wilbur turned to face him fully. Tommy was a tall kid, but even he had to look up to Wilbur. At once he felt very young again. Like that time in the fifth grade when he had skinned both knees and had to walk home by himself after missing the bus. No one had helped him out then. No one had bandaged his knees and taken him to the hospital when he was hurting. Tommy had limped all the way to his room, cried as he picked the grit and gravel out of his ruined skin, and put on long pants. He had done it all by himself.

“Welcome to Second Chances,” said Wilbur. “You can start this Tuesday. I’ll see you at eight.”

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Tommy clocked into work at eight in the morning two days later, a shiny and newly minted Tuesday. Wilbur told him that he had nothing to do because the bookstore didn’t open to the public until ten. If he wanted busy work, he could start reorganizing the Adult Historical Fiction section so it was alphabetical— the room that was down the left-side hallway and past the potted plant. Tommy didn’t particularly want to reorganize books for hours, but his soonest break was lunch at one, so he began the monumental task. Halfway through the third row from the ceiling he stopped.

“Wilbur,” he called, “There’s a cat in here.”

Wilbur’s head poked out from around the corner. “That’s just Enya. She’s sweet. Give her a pet.”

The cat was sleeping in the alcove between *Bialkowski*, *Sarah* and *Bichler*, *Emma*. She was thin, spindly, with bones that jugged sharply out from soft skin. Tommy scratched her behind the ears. Her tail flicked. “Are you feeding her? Is she yours?”

“She’s old,” Wilbur said. “I leave her a bowl of food but sometimes old cats just aren’t as hungry anymore.”

Tommy left Enya sleeping where she was and moved on.

Tuesday passed; Tommy finished work and clocked out. He slept on Techno and Phil’s futon and then went back to work the next morning. Enya was still sleeping in the same spot. Wilbur was eating a croissant from the bakery across the street. Tommy finished *Claborn* through *Dengler* and went back to Techno’s apartment.

The third day Tommy had no work. He sat at Techno’s place and did nothing.

The fourth day Wilbur asked Tommy to grab him a coffee and gave him a five dollar bill for it. He said that Tommy could grab something extra for himself, if he wanted. Tommy bought a ham and cheese sandwich and ate it in the back room, a novel full of short horror stories open on his legs in front of him.

He finished work and clocked out; he headed back home; he returned another day; the hours passed, slow and syrupy, blending together until a whole week had passed and Tommy had hardly realized, caught in a strange state of suspension. That Tuesday, before Tommy left, Wilbur stopped him at the door and said, "Your paycheck."

It was a check for an astounding one hundred and thirty-five dollars. Tommy stared at it. The check was crisp and clean in his hands. "I don't have a bank account," he said stupidly. He had nowhere to cash the check.

"Have Techno help you set one up," said Wilbur. "See you Thursday."

The next day, Tommy asked Techno to sacrifice a few precious hours of sleep so he could drive Tommy to the bank. Together they deposited Tommy's check into a newly formed bank account. Techno caved and ended up buying him a checkbook right as they were going to leave as well so Tommy could access the money inside.

So Tommy had a bank account with one hundred and thirty-five dollars in it, along with a bright white checkbook, and twenty dollars of cash left in his pocket. It was the most money he had ever had to his name in his life. In celebration, he went to treat himself to an Italian sandwich from the deli; but as he was about to order, something queasy coiled in his stomach. He could not bring himself to part with the slightest amount of money, and could not explain why. Instead, he turned on his heel and left.

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The sky: blue and strewn with pale, feathery clouds, one of the last sunny days of fall. Tommy was sorting books in the filmmaking section of Second Chances, which was filled with glossy pages of photography and detailed depictions of camera angles. One book was entirely filled with pornography. It made Tommy's ears go bright red, and he hastily slammed it shut. Another book was titled *The Making of Documentaries*. That one was much more fascinating.

Wilbur's voice startled him from the reverie. "Good book."

He was leaning against the doorway leading into the room, watching Tommy read. Silently, Tommy closed the book. He went to place it back on the shelf, flushed with the embarrassment of being caught slacking off.

Wilbur suggested, "It's a good book to read through. I think I skimmed that one once."

"Yeah, I guess so."

“Are you much of a reader?”

Tommy thought about the time he had been forced to read *Great Gatsby* in his freshman year of high school. After the semester had ended, he had sat in front of a trash bin and methodically torn every page out. He shook his head.

“I read a lot of poetry as a kid,” continued Wilbur. “Have you ever read poetry?” Another shake of the head. “Well, we’ve got to get you some good poetry to read, then. Techno probably has some recommendations. You’re missing out.”

Silence. Wilbur’s expression turned tighter. “Why won’t you talk to me?”

That surprised Tommy. “I am talking to you. Right now.”

“You’re not. I’m talking *at* you. You told me that you only talk when you want to, so if you don’t want to talk right now, that’s alright. But this place gets boring easily. I want to get to know you more.”

“I hate reading,” said Tommy. “I dropped out because of it.” That was only part of the reason, but at least it was the scarcest olive branch of a conversation he could hold out.

Wilbur’s brows crawled together like two fuzzy caterpillars. “You dropped out because you hated reading?”

And some other reasons, Tommy thought. “I don’t like being told what to do.”

“What *do* you like to do?”

“Dunno,” shrugged Tommy. “Organizing books isn’t so bad.”

“Yeah, but you can’t do this forever. It’s just busy work.”

“I like it,” said Tommy, and Wilbur sighed, but he didn’t press the matter much longer.

“Any other hobbies you’ve got, at least? Some people do art, or write, or crochet or something. Some people are into wine tasting. Anything interesting like that?”

Tommy was loud and talkative as a child. It had been said quite often that he was shriller than a siren and gave anyone within a five mile radius a headache. He thought about how on his first day of kindergarten, he had said proudly that his hobby was telling jokes. His teacher had laughed, but in a distinctly unfunny way. Tommy spent a lot of that year sitting in silence and facing the corner. Teachers’ dislike of him tended to be a constant. He spent most of first grade rubbing at the stinging welts on his hand from his teacher’s ruler. He had learned that being loud was not good. Being loud was something punishable. Something dim and heavy sank low in his chest at Wilbur’s words.

“Not really,” he lied. The dim thing sank lower. “I just float along.”

Wilbur was a smart man. He could sense the discomfort, and dropped the topic. He left Tommy alone for the rest of the day. But he picked it right back up the next afternoon.

“So,” he’d asked, “Why did you drop out?”

Tommy repeated the same answer he had given the day prior. He didn’t like being told what to do and didn’t like the work he was doing. Wilbur’s expression was less shocked and slightly more judgmental this time.

“I went to University of Rhode Island for college,” he said, “Go Rams, and all that. I majored in anthropology. It wasn’t anything interesting, but college was a good experience for me.”

Tommy scoffed low in his chest. “Don’t care.”

“Oh, come on. Surely you thought *something* about college was decent.”

Tommy stopped short. At once he realized what the discrepancy was between them. Without bothering to think, he informed Wilbur. “I didn’t drop out of college. I dropped out of high school. I got suspended for a whole week and decided I wouldn’t be coming back.”

Wilbur froze. It took a whole five seconds before he opened his mouth again. “Tommy,” he asked, “How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” Tommy said.

“How old are you really?”

Pinned beneath his gaze like a butterfly squirming beneath a white-hot spotlight, Tommy could not lie. “Seventeen. And a half.”

“Seventeen,” Wilbur muttered. He rubbed at his temples. “I’m going to kill Techno,” he said, and looked back up at Tommy. “Why the hell would you drop out?”

Tommy shrugged listlessly.

“Dropping out of high school is the dumbest decision you could have possibly made,” informed Wilbur. “You need to be smarter than that.”

Tommy hated being told that he needed to be smarter than he was. His face went hot and red. Stubbornly he turned back to the books.

“I’m serious,” persisted Wilbur. “Don’t you want to do something with your life?”

“Who says I can’t?”

“What do you want to do?” asked Wilbur. “What’s *driving* you, Tommy? What makes you get up each morning? What makes you keep living?”

The conversation absurdly reminded Tommy of the time he had been forced to see a school counselor. The counselor had gotten multiple reports, she said, of Tommy’s inability to be silent in class and his inability to pull himself together when asked. She had asked him just about the same question that Wilbur had asked. Tommy’s answer, stubborn and irritated: *I don’t give a fuck about any of this shit*. That response was not appreciated. He had learned,

yet again, that there were answers people wanted and answers that they didn't. The tricky part was figuring out which response would placate which person.

So he experimented, testing the waters with Wilbur. "I always liked the idea of doing movies as a kid."

It was the right response. Wilbur cocked his head. "Like film?"

"Yeah. Maybe I'll go into film someday. Work behind the camera and shit."

"You know that you can't go into film without going to film school," said Wilbur. "And you can't get into film school without a diploma."

Maybe it had been the wrong response. "Dunno, then."

"I think you should go back to high school."

"Are you firing me?"

"No," said Wilbur, "I think you can do better than Second Chances, is all."

"Maybe I'll do what Techno does, then," Tommy responded scornfully. "Doesn't seem like you need much skill for that shit."

Wilbur came over and put a hand on Tommy's shoulder. He waited until Tommy turned to look at him and said, face all stone and serious, "Don't you dare end up like Techno, right? You've gotta do something more. I want you to do something more."

Tommy frowned. Wilbur dropped his hand. "Keep on shelving."

"Okay," Tommy said, and he kept on shelving.

He brought the conversation to Techno later that night, right as Techno was about to leave for his shift. Techno laughed. He laughed at a lot of stupid things, just like Phil did, and Tommy didn't understand why he was laughing at Wilbur's words. But Techno explained. "Wilbur likes to tell me that I'm wasting potential. He likes to tell me that I should be doing something better than night shifts at the warehouse. Something better with my life."

"That seems rude."

"He's my friend and that means he hates me sometimes," Techno said plainly. "I don't have to agree with everything he says."

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After a few weeks of working at Second Chances, Wilbur made the executive decision that he and Tommy had become close enough that Tommy could be brought along for Friday night

get-togethers. Tommy wasn't sure about that, but Wilbur refused to give him a choice. He made Tommy get right into his car after the bookstore closed early on Friday— a dingy, scraped-up, bright orange Prius that was hardly big enough for Wilbur, let alone Tommy. They crammed in together and Wilbur drove two blocks over to The Singing Sail, a local bar that most of the town frequented quite often. Tommy was not twenty-one yet, but Wilbur wrapped an arm around Tommy's shoulders and pulled him inside. No one seemed to care.

"Techno should be here soon," Wilbur assured him. "Usually it's just a few of us, because not everyone lives here year round— but it's busy when the rest of town rolls in. You'll see when it gets dark later."

The bar was mauve and black with one wall of reddish, exposed brick, though nearly every inch of the wall was covered in various street signs and license plates from each of the fifty states. When the lights dimmed, it was all neon and glowing. There was a heady, drunken sense of camaraderie. People knew this bar. People liked this place.

Someone called out brightly when Wilbur approached the bar. "Niki," Wilbur grinned, and the girl across the counter beamed in recognition as well. The two of them hugged—messy, half sprawled over the freshly polished bar, arms across shoulders and hair tangling. Tommy stood to the side, feeling distinctly lost, wrapped inside skin that did not feel like his own. He did not know either of the people behind the bar, not the girl or the boy that Wilbur was exchanging a complicated handshake with. The three of them knew each other, but Tommy was an outsider. That was, until Wilbur put a hand on Tommy's shoulder and tugged him forward.

"This is Tommy," he introduced, "My newest hire. Tommy, this is Niki, over there is Jack— do either of you know where Fundy is? I thought that he was coming tonight, he is, right, and," He directed the next statement to Tommy, turning back to face him, "Sometimes Eret shows up, but they might be out of town this week. Not entirely sure."

It was a whole barrage of people. Tommy tried to place names to faces but thought that he failed more often than he succeeded. According to Jack, George was out of town, visiting family in London. He was flying back on the seventeenth of next month. Fundy was upstairs using Jack's restroom, but he would be down in a few minutes. Techno and Phil were on their way.

Niki and Jack, Tommy learned, were the two proud co-owners of The Singing Sail, and excellent bartenders to boot. Tommy had never met a woman like Niki before. Growing up, he had thought that girls were only allowed into one of three occupations: teachers, secretaries, or mothers. But Niki was none of those. Tommy thought that he liked her, and everything about her— the streak of white in her hair, her fierce grin, the smudged eyeliner that dragged itself like wings up her face. She introduced herself to him properly once Wilbur was out of the way with a firm handshake.

Everyone who arrived crowded onto a round table in the back corner by the dartboard, and Tommy was introduced to Fundy, a reedy guy with a smile that could have had sharp teeth in it if Tommy looked hard enough. The table could fit four people comfortably and six people uncomfortably if they all squished right together. Thankfully, Niki and Jack were spending most of the night behind the bar. There was more space than Tommy had first thought.

“It’s a great place,” Wilbur said over the din, “Gets busier as the night goes on. Pretty much everyone in Baileyville comes here.”

“Drinks?” called Jack loudly. He pointed at each person over and over, the whole host of them: Wilbur, Tommy, Techno, Phil, Fundy. “The regular? Anything new? We’ve got a special cocktail for the whole month of October.”

Wilbur said *the regular*. Tommy puffed out his chest and asked for the only drink he knew—a whiskey sour. Wilbur burst out laughing, an explosive high-pitched sound. Jack gave Tommy an amused glance and reassured him. *I’ll make you something good.*

He came back twenty minutes later with a black tray full of clinking glasses, lined up like rows of foot soldiers. Everyone at the table got a drink but a few people: Tommy, because he was too young, Techno, because he was driving back home and didn’t want to be impaired, and Wilbur, because as Techno mentioned under his breath, he was in sobriety. Tommy didn’t know if being surrounded by drunk people was supposed to be good for sobriety or not, but either way Wilbur stirred his straw around a syrupy, pink soda mixture and didn’t look one bit disappointed by the lack of alcohol in it.

Finally, Tommy dared to ask, “Can I have your maraschino cherry?”

Wilbur gave it to him. His legs swung from the bar stool. Tommy enjoyed the sickly sweet taste of his own drink, something with lemon and lime, and watched as more people poured into the bar. The noise increased, churning and tumultuous and loud, and the lights dimmed further until it was low and sultry in every corner. Jack went around and opened all the windows so the bar didn’t steam over from the people inside, and then went around delivering drinks to every table. For all his apparent scrawniness, he sure could carry a tray of at least a dozen beers in each hand. Everyone was alive and vivid. Tommy felt sweat bead at the back of his neck. There he was, a spot of blackness sailing through a sea of luminescent life, surrounded by the molten core of the world itself.

“I’m going to talk with Fundy,” Wilbur said into his ear, “Techno will probably be back in a moment. Don’t get lost.” Then he left Tommy alone, vanishing into the crowd. Tommy swung his legs, scratched his thumbnail into the table.

Another voice startled him. “Hey.” Tommy looked up and saw Niki sitting across from him, a friendly smile on her face. “It’s nice to meet you,” she said, “It’s always great when there’s changes in town. Things get so still around here, you know?”

Tommy did know. He could understand the stagnant feeling of being stuck in the same place for too long. “I’m Tommy,” he said stupidly, though she already knew that. “I work at Second Chances. I’m Techno’s cousin.”

“How are you liking Baileyville so far?”

Tommy thought long and hard. “It’s boring,” he said honestly, which made Niki laugh, the sound like a pearl from an oyster. “But I kind of like it. Better than Boston.”

“You’re from there?”



“Yeah. It’s worse there. At least here there are people I like.”

Niki beamed. “That’s sweet.”

They kept talking, and halfway into the conversation, Niki pulled out one of those long, thin cigarettes that smelled like fruit. Tommy raised an eyebrow, and Niki laughed again. She wouldn’t let him have one, even when he asked somewhat politely. “They’re not good for you,” she said, “I promise that it’s not an addiction you want.” Then she lit another one right back up. “I’m trying to break the habit.”

“You’re smoking one now,” Tommy said.

“We’ve all got our vices,” Niki said. It was hard to hear her over the music and the din of the crowd. “For some people they smoke or drink. Sometimes you have to do the ugly things to stay alive.” She stood up, blew a plume of white smoke into the air. “I’ve got to get back to work— another one of those ugly things. You know how it is. I think Jack is going to kill me for staying away for so long. But I’ll see you around, yeah?”

Tommy nodded. He could smell the fruity smoke in the air. Niki gave a friendly wave of farewell, and disappeared behind the bar again. Wilbur slid neatly into the space she left behind.

“It’s fucking stupid,” Tommy said. He wasn’t sure why the words had slipped out. Wilbur frowned at him, about to ask what exactly was so fucking stupid, but Tommy cut him off as he opened his mouth. “The whole *everyone’s got vices* thing. There’s no reason for doing the ugly things. There’s no reason for any of that. Drinking or smoking. It’s all stupid.”

Wilbur pinched his arm. “Don’t be rude.”

“Fuck you.”

“That’s Baileyville for you,” Wilbur snorted, and he upended his drink into his mouth like taking an alcohol-free shot. “I’m going to get Jack to make me another one of these. Do you want something?”

“A whole bowl of maraschino cherries,” Tommy said. Wilbur raised an eyebrow at that, like he was joking. But when he came back from the bar he had one of those mini white bar plates piled high with red cherries.

Jack came over to the table next, transferring drink-making over to Niki. He was boisterous and loud and only slightly tipsy, and bold enough to challenge Techno, sitting there nursing a club soda, to a game of darts.

“You’re making a mistake, mate,” Phil said, but Techno grinned, rolling his wrists out.

“You’re on, Manifold,” he said, “Phil, you’re on my team?”

“I want the new kid,” Jack said, and pointed to Tommy. “You know how to play darts?” Tommy shook his head. “That’s alright,” Jack said, in a faux-whisper, “I don’t know all that well. We need to make it down to three hundred and one points. Just do your best, okay?”

“Loser from last time gets the first throw,” Techno said, and Jack rolled his eyes. He took the first shot, Tommy took the second, and Jack the third; then Techno and Phil went, scoring a whopping sixty-five points between the two of them.

“Come on,” Jack swore, “You can’t be good at everything, fuck off.”

“Says who?” Techno returned. But during his next turn, the dart he threw went wide and pitched right into the red instead of the black. Phil’s next two shots missed the twenty mark and fell squarely into one. Jack and Tommy, as miserably fitted for darts as they were, ended up winning by twenty-three points. Techno wasn’t bothered by the loss. He sat back down next to Phil, who was more than moderately drunk by that point, and laughed about it.

Jack collected the final few darts from the board and turned to Tommy. He shook his hand quite professionally. “You’re a good player.”

“Thanks,” Tommy said. He felt lightheaded.

“You’ll be here next Friday, won’t you?”

Tommy nodded. The lightheadedness wasn’t from nausea but from something much lighter. The feeling of soaring high overhead. He thought that if he was welcome, he might have liked to return every Friday until the end of time. He wanted to dip his toes into the friendship they had, into the community they had formed. He wanted to be a part of it all, welcomed into the world at large.

The sky was black and inky when the night came to a close. Stars were strewn across the ink. Tommy stared up at them and tried to count them all as he, Techno, and Phil left into the cold air.

That night, Wilbur drove back to wherever he lived, and Tommy got into the backseat of Techno and Phil’s car. He could feel some heavy, strange tension in the air, stretching out like putty. The two of them must have been arguing about something prior to the bar, but they could hardly argue about it with Tommy in the car. So all the three of them did was stew in it. When they got back to the apartment, Phil went to take a shower. Tommy laid down on the futon. Techno stood at the fridge, then the stove. He and Phil hadn’t cleaned up from dinner, apparently. There were still splatters of sauce across the counter.

Techno wasn’t doing anything. Only standing there, thinking. A lump grew in Tommy’s throat. He had a lot of experience with people breaking bad news to him. He knew body language well, and he saw familiarity in every inch of Techno’s back.

Without turning around to face him, Techno said, “You know, it’s funny.”

“What is?”

“At the bar tonight.” He braced both hands on the counter. “That’s the most I’ve seen you interact with people ever. What is Wilbur doing to you at that bookstore?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“You were so talkative when I first met you. Why are you so quiet around me now?” Techno turned around. “Seriously,” he said, “Talk to me.”

“I don’t have anything to say,” Tommy said. “People talk to *me* and I don’t have anything to respond. That’s not my fault.”

“I don’t think that’s true. I know that’s not true. You never stopped talking as a kid. Even when people weren’t talking directly to you. You were loud and annoying and honestly, enjoyable. So why aren’t you like that now?”

Horrifically, Tommy could feel something welling in the back of his throat, a sick lump that wouldn’t go away.

“You’re just so different,” Techno said finally. “I guess I didn’t realize how much ten years really was. I barely recognize you now.”

Tommy mumbled, “People change.”

“When I met you, I thought you were annoying.” Techno kept talking, even when Tommy’s face crumpled into something ugly and sour at that. “You were this little four foot tall kid who followed me around at Aunt Jessie’s birthday party and wouldn’t let go of my pants leg. I didn’t even want to be there, but you wouldn’t let me leave early. You had this yellow bruise, right on your temple.” He pointed where with his fingers. “You told me it was from falling down the stairs and hitting your head. But I’m not an idiot. Never have been. I brought you to the bathroom, and you stared at yourself in the mirror like you had never really seen yourself before. I knew, right then, that you were lying about how you got the bruise. Do you remember what I said next?”

“I remember,” Tommy said. He did, clear as day. He still had the sticky note Techno had pressed into his hand and told him to never lose.

“I told you that you could come over anytime you needed. I gave you my address.”

“I remember,” Tommy said again, quietly.

“And you were really excited after that, for a reason I couldn’t really explain or understand. I couldn’t find your mom, so we ended up eating dinner together that night from the buffet. Do you remember? Everything bagels and cream cheese with lox. And potato salad, and kebabs, and—”

“And those sugar cookies,” said Tommy.

Techno laughed dryly. “I’m not surprised that’s the thing you remember from that night. You loved those. You told me that you weren’t allowed that much sugar at home, so I piled a dozen onto my plate and pretended like they were for me. But I gave them all to you when we sat down and started eating.”

The sun had been low in the sky, golden and pink on the horizon. Tommy had gotten crumbs all over his lapel. Each cookie was as big as his whole hand. Techno’s voice was muted.

“It was really late after dinner. I told you that I had to go, because I had stayed about three hours longer than I had wanted and I couldn’t bear socializing with anyone just a moment longer. I’ve never really wanted to be a part of *that* family. I never have. But you *wouldn’t let go*. You dragged your heels through the mud and ruined your shoes and your pants trying to stop me from taking you back to my family. I felt awful for it. I couldn’t stop looking at that bruise on your face. And— I thought about just putting you in my car and driving you to my home.

“But then your mom shouted *Tommy* and you jumped up and we walked over. I brushed all the crumbs off your shirt. I didn’t want you getting in trouble. My jacket was all stretched out from how hard you clung on.”

“I remember,” said Tommy. “I was so scared I would get in trouble from all those cookies, even if she didn’t know. I had something on my cheek, and I remember my mom wiping it off. And she wiped underneath my eyes. When I got back into the car, my mom told me I was crying. She wanted to know why. She was annoyed with me.”

“Did you tell her?”

His gaze was unfocused, staring up at the ceiling. “I didn’t even know myself.”

“You know,” said Techno, “That’s the most you’ve spoken to me since you got here.”

“Sorry.”

“Tommy, what are you even apologizing for?”

His mouth clamped shut. Techno waited a moment longer before saying, “It would be nice if you talked a bit more. Though it’s not like I miss your annoying voice or anything.”

Tommy didn’t take offense to that. In fact, it almost made him laugh. Techno vanished into his side of the apartment, and the shower cut off from Phil’s bathroom. Tommy stared at the ceiling and watched as light flicked off all around him, leaving him stranded in the middle of a dark apartment that was not his own and never would be.

Laying on the futon that night, Tommy closed his eyes and whispered all the words he wanted to say but couldn’t find the resolve to. And he was thinking *why was I crying in that car?* He could still taste the vanilla and almond of the sugar cookies in his mouth. He could still remember that humid, low summer day at eight years old. He remembered Techno’s sticky note like a red-hot brand in his mind.

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The rain pattered down hard against the windows. Techno’s coat was slick and dripping when he got back. The shift had felt longer that day, he said. He needed to quit. He couldn’t take

one more day. He said that every single time he came back from work, though, so Tommy was used to his complaining. He knew that Techno wasn't being serious.

That afternoon was the first time that all three of them were together in the apartment in a while. Techno had been lucky enough to score day shifts that week, so the apartment was silent and empty when all three were out and then silent and full once the three of them returned. The tension that had been thick and dense between Techno and Phil last week had not dissolved. It had only grown worse.

"Are you coming to the Sail tonight?"

Techno shook the rain from his boots and bent down. "I don't think so."

"You sure?"

"I'm tired," he said curtly. "It's been a long day. I'm going to sleep."

"You're going to leave Wilbur there alone?"

Techno tilted his chin towards Tommy. "Well, he's there, isn't he?"

Phil made eye contact with Techno. They had another one of those silent, wordless conversations, communicated only through eyes. Tommy's gaze flicked between the two of them. He thought that he was getting better at interpreting the language that only the two of them spoke.

"Phil," Techno said, "I'm not having this discussion in front of him."

"It'll happen eventually."

"I can leave," Tommy volunteered.

Techno rounded on him. "No. This is your apartment too for as long as you need. I promised."

"You make a lot of promises," Phil said. The statement could have been angry, but there was no hint of reproach in his tone.

"I like to help out." Techno tossed one boot away, then another. They thunked hard against the wall. "Phil. Come on."

"I'm just going to leave," Tommy tried again.

"Stay," Techno said venomously. It was the first hint of aggression he had shown in the entire time Tommy had lived with him, and it was sharp enough that it frightened Tommy to stay precisely where he was, cross-legged on the futon, trapped inside the argument he was unwillingly a part of. "I'm staying too. I'm staying *here*. Baileyville. I'm not moving, and I told you that."

"Wilbur will be fine without you."

“Shit, Phil— you practically called him your son years ago. What changed?”

“Maybe I don’t want to see you throw everything away,” Phil said. This argument had clearly been argued many times over and over. “He’s getting better now. You know that.”

Tommy wanted to ask what was wrong with Wilbur. But Techno spoke before he could. “He needs me. And I need him.”

“This town is dying. Everyone wants to get out.”

“No one is stopping you from leaving.”

“You are,” Phil said. The expression behind his eyes shuttered and went blank. “I’m not leaving without you.”

Techno’s face went cold and hard. He said nothing but straightened up again silently. He put his shoes back on. He put his coat back on. Then he left out the front door, closing it behind him. Phil stood in silence for nearly thirty seconds before he resumed scrubbing at the dishes in the sink with brisk, efficient movements. He said nothing to Tommy the entire time.

That was the first and only argument Tommy ever experienced while living with Phil and Techno, and it was hardly an argument, only a hidden, tense disagreement. When the next morning arrived, all tension was forgiven. Phil still laughed at every one of Techno’s dry jokes. Techno still treated him just as fondly. They ate meals together as if the night prior had never happened. Tommy had no idea what to make of it all.

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Tommy spilled it all to Wilbur a week later over blueberry scones and medium roast coffee. Wilbur listened without interrupting and eventually tried to explain it all back in a form Tommy could understand.

“Techno and I have a weird friendship,” said Wilbur. It sounded as if he were speaking mostly to himself, only allowing Tommy to listen in on private musings. “Sometimes I think that he thinks he needs to take care of me. And I don’t want to be taken care of, but sometimes I think that I still need it. I think he feels like he owes me. And as much as he helps me out, I know that he needs me too. Even if he doesn’t like to say it or show it. I guess you could say that it’s complicated. Yeah. It’s complicated.”

Tommy picked at the remnants of his scone and tried to understand. “I mean, that’s just friendship, innit? Friends need each other.”

“It’s different,” Wilbur said plainly. “I was twenty when I first took over Second Chances, and Techno was about the same age. Things were so different then. That was before Salvage Garden shut down, and before Magpie closed too— those shops were the heart of Baileyville to anyone who’s lived here more than five years, but you don’t even know them, or how

different it was. Techno was different back then too. He was a lot more shy. It took him weeks before he worked up the nerve to speak to me. He's got that anxiety, right? It eats away at him, he can't help it. But once we got to know each other a bit more, he asked me to help him with getting over it. So I helped him, in all the ways that I knew how. I introduced him to Phil, to everyone else, and the rest is history. They live together now. All good things."

"But," Tommy said, "He said— well, it sounded like he helped you. Not that you helped him."

Wilbur huffed. "That part is a long story."

"Is it?"

"I could tell you the short version."

"Okay," Tommy said. He waited. Wilbur sucked in a deep breath, chewed at the inside of his lip, and finally pushed up the sleeves of his sweater. Against one forearm was a long, jagged scar, puckered and pink against otherwise smooth skin. Wilbur looked down at it as if he had forgotten it existed.

"That's where I tried to kill myself," he said. His words were so blunt and callous that Tommy didn't know how to respond. He gaped like a goldfish before the embarrassment of asking Wilbur to reveal a secret like that burned him up from the inside out. He swallowed, opened his mouth to apologize, but Wilbur laughed. It wasn't choked but relatively lighthearted.

"I told you when we first met, just not all the details," he said. "Techno found me and took me to the hospital in time. I lived. And I'm fine. I'm happy now. I've got friends and good things. I'm not going back to where I was."

"Shit," said Tommy, "Sorry for asking."

"Don't be sorry."

"No, it's just—" Tommy scrubbed a hand over his face. "I guess I'm glad you're still here."

Wilbur's face softened like melted butter. "Don't say that. I'll cry."

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October journeyed on and on. Halfway through the month, the whole of the group invited Tommy to the local Oktoberfest celebration. Oktoberfest turned out to be this bright and explosive festival that the whole town attended. Niki and Jack poured beer for everyone until they all went dizzy. Tommy ate his way through roasted pork and Bavarian sausages and large soft pretzels with mustard and sauerkraut and potato dumplings until his stomach was so full he thought he would split. Techno allowed him one carefully-monitored sip of beer,

which tasted like wet socks, but Tommy grinned and told Techno it was the greatest thing he had ever tasted because it made him feel like an adult. That made Phil double over with laughter. He clapped Tommy between his shoulders and told him to *never change*.

October came and went. November rode the coattails of the month and dragged winter along with it. The bright leaves on the trees were now bare. Tommy could taste early snow on the air. He went to work and finished reorganizing the Historical Memoirs section to Wilbur's liking. He moved onto Children's Comics next. It was silent except for when Tommy talked. He found himself breaking the silence more and more. After all, shelving things for hours each day was quite boring. But Wilbur never once seemed annoyed by him. He just laughed at every bad joke Tommy cracked and told him, very honestly, that swearing as a seventeen year old was important for healthy development. Tommy could say *fuck* all he wanted.

But the day still came, like Tommy had always known it would. Two weeks before Thanksgiving, Techno stopped him and said, quite seriously, "This apartment isn't made for three people."

He wanted Tommy to move out, and Tommy agreed with him. He was getting tired of sleeping on the futon. He wanted his own bathroom too. "How much longer can I stay?"

"As long as you need," Techno said, "I can help you find someplace else to live if you want."

Baileyville was a dying town. No one moved there anymore, and everyone who lived there wanted to move out. It was obvious that one-third of the people currently living in Techno's apartment wanted to move out. Somehow Tommy didn't think it would be hard to find himself a place to live, even given his current budget. He shook his head. "I can do it myself."

"Can you?"

"I'm an adult," Tommy said at seventeen years old. "Of course I can."

Techno left him to it. Tommy thought about all the places he could move to. Maybe he had overstayed his welcome, not just in Apartment 303 but also in Baileyville itself. Maybe it was time to take the money he had accumulated from shelving books and move on. He had about four hundred and fifty dollars in his bank account, waiting to be spent. The year was only 1983, after all; that would get him quite far. It could have purchased a train ticket across the entire country.

He fantasized for a moment about moving to California. The cross-continental train ride, and what the sunset would look like over the Pacific Ocean. All green and gold and blue. But he knew it was an impossibility; he didn't think he would like California much. He would have preferred to stay in the sleepy, honeycomb town of Baileyville he had grown to appreciate.

That night, as he was packing up his duffel bag, Techno came to sit beside him. "You don't have to leave tonight," he said. "It was just something to think about in the upcoming months."



"I know," said Tommy. But he liked being prepared. There was something oddly sweet about having everything he ever needed all in one place. Quick to up and go. No hesitation about it. It felt like the potential of fulfilling the thing he had daydreamed about ever since he had turned twelve years old. He zipped his duffel up and sat there. Techno was in the armchair across from him.

Tommy dared to ask, "Why did you let me stay?"

Techno only looked at him. "Where else were you going to go?"

Tommy opened his mouth and then closed it again. Techno's apartment had been the only place in his mind, the only destination possible. He hadn't had any other plan.

"Plus I promised," added Techno. "And I don't go back on my promises."

"You make a lot of promises," said Tommy, echoing Phil's words.

Techno shrugged. "So I've heard."

"It would be okay if you went back on a promise from ten years ago." Tommy picked at his nails, looking down. "No one would blame you. Especially for someone like me."

"But I meant what I said. You could come over anytime."

That was the promise that Tommy had clung to for so long. That there was some miraculous, wonderful safe haven away from the tumultuous, miserable life he existed within. Away from everything. From the things he never liked to think about.

It had only been a few weeks, and yet it seemed like so long ago that his only hope had been that sticky note. It seemed like so long ago that he was a regular high school student caught up in the sweeping rush of grades and detention and lunchtime bells and homework, and the chaotic mess that was home. He had walked those linoleum halls so often, paced the sidewalks. But all his memories now seemed distant and far away. It seemed incredible to think that all the faces he had seen around him were still there. Only a few hours drive away, everyone else was still doing the same thing, day in and day out. Half of his old friends and acquaintances were sitting and doing homework, or going out to the movies, or eating together at the local diners. Meanwhile Tommy's life had changed entirely.

He stared at the ceiling. For as long as he tried he could not capture a single wink of sleep.

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Wilbur did the budgeting for Second Chances that afternoon while Tommy was stuck with a sleeping Enya in his lap, unable to continue organizing. He was reading his way through *Wuthering Heights*, which was a horrible story but a beautiful novel. It was the only time he had enjoyed a classic book in his life. Wilbur's expression sitting at the front desk grew faint and stormy, and eventually he said, "Tommy, go grab me a coffee, would you?"

Tommy reluctantly dislodged Enya from his lap and left. He came back with medium roast, the kind Wilbur preferred, but Wilbur's expression hadn't gotten any happier. "All good?"

"Yeah," Wilbur said, "Think it might be time for another local bake sale."

"What?"

"I'm a bit short on mortgage this month."

Tommy realized he didn't even know where Wilbur lived. He asked, and Wilbur pointed right upstairs. Then the question was blurted before Tommy could remind himself to keep his mouth shut. "Could I move in?"

"Take it easy," Wilbur laughed. "I only met you a month ago."

"Techno's kicking me out." Wilbur's eyes grew wide, and hastily Tommy amended his statement. "He's not actually kicking me out. But I want to leave. Well, he asked me to leave. And I need someplace to live. I work here, and you live right upstairs. So I might as well, right?"

"How old are you again?"

"Eighteen," Tommy said. "Almost."

Wilbur sighed. Under his breath he muttered, "Techno owes *me* a favor by this point." Then he straightened up from poring over finances and spreadsheets of calculations. "I'll show you around."

Tommy followed him through the back room all the way up a tiny cramped staircase. Apparently Wilbur didn't bother much with locking his door, because he didn't fumble for his keys at all before turning the knob and inviting Tommy in. "It's not much," he said, "If you really did want to move in I would have to clean out the spare room. And it's small. But it's better than nothing."

The door opened into a small hallway that branched off into two rooms. One of the doors was open and revealed what must have been Wilbur's bedroom— small, cramped, the only light coming from a thin lampshade by the window or faint wavy lines of sunlight coming through the closed blinds. His bed was lofted and underneath were dozens and dozens of teetering books. Wilbur closed the door as they passed it and nodded his chin towards the door right across the hallway. "That's the spare room," he said. "It's crowded right now, but I could clean it out."

Tommy peeked inside. It was square with one small window and it had a closet. The whole room was filled with absolute junk.

"You'd need a bed frame," said Wilbur. "And a mattress."

Tommy was used to sleeping on the futon. He had no issues with continuing to do so.

“And I think it would be good to refurbish things,” Wilbur continued. “It’s— it’s a place to stay. If you need it.”

“Wilbur,” Tommy said, “It’s fantastic.”

Wilbur surveyed him. “I feel like you’re lying.”

“I’m not.” He was being honest. “I want to move in.”

So later that week, once Wilbur had scavenged out the spare room, cleaned the closet, and remotely shuffled enough things around to make space for a new roommate, Tommy brought his duffel bag to work and unpacked in his new home. Wilbur called the landline for Apartment 303 and told them that Tommy was going to be staying at his place. Tommy tried to surreptitiously listen over the line, but he could not hear exactly what Phil’s voice was saying. Either way, it was settled. He had moved in with Wilbur Soot.

He shivered when the lights went out. It was always strange to sleep in a new place for the first time. Still, through a slit in the blinds, he could see the same moon, rising fat and yellow over all of Baileyville.

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Living with Wilbur was like living with a veritable hurricane. Things were never clean— not that they had ever been precisely *clean* while he had lived with Techno, but at least Phil had managed to keep the three of them somewhat organized. Wilbur, on the other hand, had no organization system and simply no care for anything. Everything was cramped and cluttered, and very distinctly *Wilbur*. It did not begin feeling like *Tommy* until he got over the queasy coiling of his stomach whenever it came to spending money. Wilbur had taken him out shopping, and Tommy splurged by buying a brand new, sleek record player. That one purchase chewed away at nearly half of his entire savings. He put the player right next to his bed and realized with a sick swoop in his stomach that he had just started the long and busy process of making a home.

Wilbur wanted Tommy to feel at home too. One afternoon they went out and Wilbur gave Tommy a budget of fifty dollars and told him that he could pick out anything for his room that he wanted. They walked through the furniture store and the clothing stores and finally the music store. Tommy came out with a small lamp for his bedside table, one of those massive soft pillows, an orange, sherpa-lined corduroy coat that Wilbur deeply approved of, and two records. They were good records in good condition— one was Queen’s *News of the World* and the other was Frankie Miller’s *Full House*. Tommy put one of them on the player as loud as it could go and the two of them listened to it while Wilbur washed dishes in the kitchen.

He still tripped over the boxes of books that lined the front hallway. But day after day he memorized their layout until he could walk through the whole apartment with his eyes closed.

One day without warning, Tommy clambered upstairs after locking up Second Chances and found a new shoebox sitting on his bed. They were his size, brand new grey boots for the winter. He tried them on and found that they fit. There was no note, but Tommy knew they were a gift from Wilbur. It was a wonderful gift because his own shoes were falling apart. The soles were peeling away from the rest of the shoe.

Tommy started wearing the new pair everywhere. He came home one day to find that Wilbur had thrown the old pair out. Tommy couldn't find himself caring one bit.

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In honor of moving somewhere better, somewhere that actually had space for him and wasn't simply three people crammed together in a studio apartment, everyone gathered together for a celebration. It was so much more than the typical group who visited every Friday at The Singing Sail; the elusive George was back from visiting family, so Tommy got to meet him for the first time. He was a short and sort of scrawny guy, who reminded Tommy oddly of wet, overcooked spaghetti. He had a British accent, which was interesting, because Tommy had never met someone with a British accent before. George turned out to be a relatively nice guy who loosened up as the night went on until he was laughing riotously with Wilbur and trading jokes back and forth with Jack.

There were more people that night; Eret showed up in a black skirt that fell to her knees with a voice deeper than the radio newscaster. Puffy was a sweet-sounding woman with a head full of riotous curls who gave Niki a kiss on each cheek when she arrived. She was followed by Charlie, eagerly recounting a story involving his theater troupe and a misplaced bucket of water, and Hannah, hair plaited down her back with strands of green and red. Tommy did not recognize them all, but they all introduced themselves to him. They had all heard about him already.

They all ordered Chinese food that night and ate it at the bar while Niki and Jack doled out spicy-sweet drinks for everyone but Tommy and Wilbur, who were content with the non-alcoholic versions. The world was loud and sweet and spiked with excitement; it was a celebration of fresh stars and move-ins. Waves of food passed by in gleaming boxes. They ended dinner with pre-packaged fortune cookies, which cracked open easily beneath oily fingers. Tommy read the scrawled fortune inside and tossed it away to eat another one. Far across the bar he caught Phil carefully tucking his fortune inside his wallet, pressed flat, while Techno rolled his beneath careful fingers.

Wilbur, for all his enthusiasm, didn't bother reading his at all.

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Tommy woke up after dawn midway through November and washed his face in the shared bathroom. He heard no sound coming from Wilbur's room. The time was eight-thirty; Second Chances usually had all the lights flicked on and Wilbur could be found moving around downstairs, preparing everything for the day. But there was no motion. When Tommy passed Wilbur's room again, Wilbur was still in bed.

"Oi," Tommy called, "Wake up, it's late."

But Wilbur, he found, was already awake. Only staring unblinkingly at the far wall.

Tommy did not know what to do. "Wilbur?" he asked cautiously. Wilbur did not respond. Tommy shook his shoulder. "Wilbur, are you okay?"

With nothing else to do, Tommy scoured through the phonebook until he found Apartment 303 underneath *Watson, Phil* and called the number on the landline. Techno arrived within the hour.

"You're lucky I was awake," he muttered, "I was about to go to bed."

Techno was on the night shifts that week. Tommy apologized profusely. He had lived with Techno for weeks; he knew that Techno always ran low on energy during weeks like these. But for all his complaints, Techno did not seem low on energy at all. He looked concerned, lip drawn between teeth, brows furrowed as he clambered up the stairs two at a time.

"Wilbur," he said, and knocked at the door, "It's me."

Wilbur didn't stir. Techno entered, and Tommy had a stirring sense that he did not want to intrude on something so deep and private. He turned and headed back down the stairs. He had watched Wilbur run Second Chances multiple times, and he knew the steps to take. It felt like an awful test of independence.

When there was a lull in customers and Tommy got the chance to scale the stairs to his apartment again, he peered back inside Wilbur's room. Wilbur was sitting against the headboard, knees pulled to his chest. Techno sat cross-legged across from him by the foot of the bed. He was talking, voice quiet. Tommy did not know what he was expecting him to say, but the last thing in the world he would have guessed was orchid variations.

"Phalaenopsis," Techno was saying, and Wilbur was answering, "Moth orchids. White, yellow, pink, red."

"Dendrobium."

"Pink and purple. Six leaves."

"Good. Cattleya."

Tommy stopped listening. He went back downstairs. After about an hour, Techno joined him. He ducked underneath the front desk and emerged with a still-sealed bottle of clear alcohol, tucked away in some hidden alcove.

“Bastard,” Techno muttered. “At least it’s still shut.”

“Oh,” Tommy said. “I’m sorry.”

Techno looked at him blankly. “Why are you apologizing?”

“I feel like I should have known about that. I should’ve been— more aware.”

“That’s not your job,” Techno muttered, poison in his words. “That’s why I’m here, right?”

At once the argument that Techno and Phil had the other day began to make more sense in his mind. Tommy stared at him for a moment. “Oh,” he said. It was a stupid thing to say. No other words made it to his mouth.

“What?” Techno said. “If you had a best friend you would do the same.”

“I hope I would,” Tommy said. He wanted to say more, but Techno turned away. He wrestled with the cap for a moment before cracking the bottle open, taking a swig from the top, and saying, “Is there a place to pour this out?”

“Upstairs,” Tommy said. Techno vanished. Tommy stared after him and tried to grapple with the confusion inside him. There were things that Techno and Wilbur evidently knew that Tommy was not privy to. Techno returned with a rinsed-out bottle that he promptly returned to the same hiding place. Tommy swallowed. “Is there anything I can do?”

“He’s fine,” Techno said. He sat down on the desk and stared at the wall. “I’m here.”

Tommy’s voice was reedy and thin. “Well, it seems like you’re doing a pretty good job. So— so thanks for that.”

Techno let out a dismal sigh. “You’re so young. Stay that way.”

A frown curled over his face. “I’m not.”

“You are, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But I can’t ever leave while Wilbur is still here. I can’t do it without him. And he can’t do it without me. I don’t know how we got here but neither of us can get out. I wish we were still like you, but we’re not young anymore. We’re not seventeen. We planted roots. We can’t get rid of them that easy.”

Tommy’s throat closed up. For a dreadful moment he thought he was going to cry and had no idea why. Then Techno smiled bitterly, a sad, sort of disheartening expression. “For the record,” he said, “You and I never had this conversation.”

“Okay,” Tommy said.

“And you will never tell Wilbur this.”

“Okay,” Tommy repeated.

“Let me know if he needs anything else.”

“Okay,” Tommy said, one final time.

Techno straightened up and left. By the afternoon Wilbur was upright and walking around. He never said anything to Tommy about the strange, blank depressive episode. Tommy privately hoped that it never happened again, because there were a lot of things he never wanted to see in his life. Wilbur’s expression, staring unblinkingly at the wall, and Techno’s expression, full of unnameable regret, were two of them.

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November, and thus Thanksgiving, arrived before anyone realized. The whole group gathered at The Singing Sail one night and made the executive decision to have Thanksgiving dinner together that year. Tommy frowned. “But,” he said, “Thanksgiving is for family. Don’t you all have family to go home to?”

Everyone exchanged amused glances with each other. Then Niki raised her eyebrows, and the hidden tension shattered. “Tommy,” she said, “That’s why we’re having Thanksgiving with each other.”

Everyone laughed at that, and Tommy burned bright red. It only made the slightest bit of sense. He kept his mouth shut and stirred the red and white straw around in his drink. That night was more crowded than usual; there were seven seats pulled up to the table in the back, and Tommy felt closed in and sequestered away. Sweat beaded at the back of his neck and at his temples. David Bowie was blasting through the speakers. Over the noise, he heard Niki get into a conversation with an unruly customer. It was the man who ran one of the thrift shops, an endless grey place Tommy had ventured to a few times. He knew the man; he was nice.

He said something incorrigible, drunken, and Niki sighed, wrapped a hand around his bicep, and pulled him to his feet, and only narrowly avoided the glass drink thrown at her head. Tommy’s muscles locked up. He was already on edge from being mocked earlier, and now something hungry was pounding inside his chest. It was something with teeth, and it was methodically eating away at his soft insides. He blinked and thought, for an awful moment, that he was not inside the crowded, tumultuous bar but at home. What had used to be his home. Quiet and scared and silent. Always silent.

Fundy swore loudly and helped Niki kick the guy out of the bar. He said *bitch, fuckin’ bitches* as he was unceremoniously deposited outside. Tommy tried to take a breath through a clenched jaw and put the shells of his skin back on in pieces. He could feel it peeling off, shedding like thin vellum, buzzing and scorching.

“Come on, mate,” Phil’s voice said into his ear, “Some fresh air, right?”

Tommy could not have protested even if he wanted to. Phil dragged him out the back door and forcibly sat him down on the steps. Tommy pulled his knees to his chest and closed his

eyes. The cool air and the muffled noise were wonderful. Phil's warm presence beside him wasn't so bad either.

"You okay?" Phil asked. Tommy rested his cheek on the denim over his knee and sighed. "I'm okay."

Phil did not believe him. "Are you really?"

The memory swam before his eyes. When Tommy was nine years old he went around to his neighbors and asked if he could do any jobs for them in return for payment. Most of them had laughed him off. He was young, after all. One of them asked kindly if he knew where his mother was, and if she could have his number to make sure Tommy got home safe. Tommy hightailed it out of there.

But there were a few people who did accept and gave him simple yard work to do. He made a few bucks from that. He hid them underneath the slats of his mattress and made a silent promise that it was one step towards freedom. One step towards the sticky note he kept in a place of safety. Until his mother found those six dollars. She had been upset. She had been less than sober. Tommy had been silent.

Tommy told that to Phil. Phil waited in contemplative silence and did not interrupt until he was absolutely sure that Tommy was done speaking.

"The Singing Sail," he said, "Do you not want to be there?"

"No," Tommy said. "I like it."

"You seemed pretty panicked just now."

His skin was still itching at the corners. Tommy closed his eyes. "Techno told me that I don't talk enough."

"You don't," said Phil honestly. "I've never known a teenage boy as quiet as you. Hell, even Techno talks more than you and he's all internal."

"Do you think I need to be louder?"

Phil seemed to choose his next words carefully. "I think you need to learn that you've got people who care about you, and people to care for. And those people want you to be as much of yourself as possible."

"I don't know how to do that."

"How to be yourself?"

Tommy shook his head. Time stretched on. The stars in the sky spun lazily overhead, leaving trails of dust behind. The music switched inside. The sweat at Tommy's neck had dried. His heart had slowed to a pace that he could count, an even *one-two* bump every moment.

"I guess it takes practice," Phil sighed.



Tommy knew that. His heart still ached to hear it. It was hard to practice a skill he had never done before. It was like exercising a muscle that had never been pulled. Phil continued, "For as long as it takes we'll help you out. Me. Tech. Wilbur and Niki and Fundy and Jack and everyone else. And that absolute jackass in the bar is gonna be dealt with."

Tommy swallowed. "I know."

"Ready to go back inside?"

Tommy thought about it. He did feel better. Phil helped him to his feet, and they went back inside. The man was gone, and Wilbur told him when Tommy sat back down that he'd be put on a two-drink limit for the foreseeable future. Niki and Jack managed their bar well. They had a reputation to uphold.

Jack was sweeping up the last shards of the glass, and Niki was looking at the wall. The corners of her lips turned down. "Jack, we're going to have to repaint. See, here."

"We've been meaning to repaint for ages," Jack snorted. "Weren't we going to do a wax finish for the bar at some point?"

"Yeah," laughed Niki. "I think I remember that. That's been on the list of things to do for *months*."

Tommy's voice sounded strong to his ears. "I can repaint it for you, you know."

"Oh," Niki said, "Tommy, that's very sweet."

"I'm serious." He wasn't sure why he felt such resolve. "I'll paint the whole thing. I've got nothing better to do. You don't even have to pay me."

"Don't you work at Wilbur's place?" Niki asked.

"We can't ask that of you," Jack added.

"I'm serious," Tommy repeated. He was speaking over the music pounding through his skull. "I like painting shit. I can do it Saturday. Tomorrow."

"Don't," said Niki half-seriously, but Tommy had already made up his mind. She walked away without arguing the point further.

That night, in Wilbur's small orange sedan, Tommy asked, "Where do I buy paint?"

Wilbur frowned. "There's a home renovations store a few miles away. Why do you ask?"

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He brought a bucket of mauve and black paint to The Singing Sail that next Saturday and set about unhooking all the shelves and paintings from the far wall to repaint it. It took nearly four hours, but by the time late afternoon rolled around, everything was drying neatly and all the painter's tape was removed from around the outlets and the light switches. It was a good paint job. Very impressive. At the end of it, Niki's eyes were bright and sparkling, and Jack clapped Tommy on the back and told him *good shit, mate*.

On his way out of the door, Niki pressed a fifty dollar bill into his palm. It was crisp. Tommy could tell she had gotten it from the bank just for him. He tried to give it back, but she made him keep it.

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The great American holiday of Thanksgiving rolled around only a few days later. Over discussions and phone calls, they concluded it would be held at Fundy's place. He and Eret lived together in a two-person apartment that had a wide open area in the middle, enough for Techno and Phil to lug over three folded-up tables and set them up in the middle of it. Tommy was sure that they were being loud enough to bother every single person who lived close by, but no one else seemed to care.

For some reason, Tommy had expected that Niki would be in charge of all the cooking by herself. But she was not the type of person to let everyone else sit around and do nothing. Instead, she rolled her sleeves up and doled out tasks to everyone by the time it was one in the afternoon, and dragged Techno over to help with the turkey. Apparently Techno was the only other decent cook in the whole group, and therefore the only one Niki trusted enough to help.

"You and I are on mashed potato duty," said Wilbur with a grimace. He stared at the mound of Yukon potatoes in front of them. "Niki and Techno won't trust me with anything else, and you're not much of a cook."

"I can cook," lied Tommy.

"Can you? Good. Then start peeling. We've got to get through all of these."

It was all going well until Tommy's peeler slipped, wet from the freshly rinsed potatoes. It slipped right past the white of the potato and sliced directly into the thick meat of his thumb. It was an accident. Tommy stood and stared down. For an odd moment nothing hurt at all. There was only the distant shock of seeing all the freshly peeled potatoes turn pinkish-red.

"Wilbur," he said, "I'm bleeding."

Wilbur moved much faster than Tommy did. "Shit," he said, "Are you okay?" Of course Tommy was. He still couldn't feel any pain in his thumb. Wilbur made him stick his hand underneath the sink and called to Eret for the first aid kit. His thumb still hadn't stopped bleeding when Eret wrapped it with gauze and a bandage wrap. It was only after all the

potatoes were thrown away and the table cleaned up that the pain hit. It throbbed up and down his arm like sheet lightning across the sky. His thumb pulsed white-hot.

“Ow,” he muttered, an understatement. Wilbur, who had been demoted from peeling potatoes alongside him, sat next to him on the cushy sofa. In front of them the television played football. The Detroit Lions were going against the Pittsburgh Steelers. Pittsburgh was losing badly.

“It’ll feel better soon,” Wilbur said. “I thought you said you could cook.”

“I can.”

Wilbur did not seem convinced. He looked at Tommy’s hand again. “That could have been bad. Really bad. It’s good that you’re not too hurt.”

“But we had to throw all the potatoes out.”

Wilbur looked at him blankly. “So?”

Tommy did not understand. He only sat and waited for the pain to fade away.

In only a few hours, the air filled with the scent of roasting turkey and onions and carrots. Wilbur had gone for a walk, hand stuffed in his pockets, and Techno and Phil had vanished somewhere too, whether to another room or down the hall, Tommy did not know. Fundy had just helped Niki put the last apple pie into the oven, both their hands dusted with flour and cinnamon. He came to sit next to Tommy, eyes on the television. He whooped loudly when Detroit scored another touchdown, seven points added to the scoreboard.

“I used to live in Detroit,” he said proudly. “That’s my home team.”

Tommy frowned. He asked why Fundy had bothered to move to Baileyville, the smallest town in Maine, right on the border between Canada and the United States, when he had lived in such a busy place before.

“You’re from Boston, right?” Tommy nodded. “Same reason as you, I guess. I wanted someplace new. Plus,” he added, “It’s so much prettier here in the fall.”

The leaves outside were still molting in beautiful, golden shades. Although half the trees were thin and bare, the other half stood tall like plumes of fire. Tommy followed Fundy’s gaze, and Fundy grinned.

“I’ve *always* wanted to go to Boston, you know. What’s it like there? Why’d you move?”

“Boring,” Tommy said, “Cold, sometimes.”

“It’s going to be *freezing* here in a few months,” Eret called from the kitchen. She was standing and chatting with Niki, busy trying to get the radio to work. “With wind chill, there are days when no one even goes outside.”

“I hate the cold.”

“It’s not that bad,” Niki said, “You have a winter coat, don’t you?”

Tommy prodded at his thumb experimentally. The peeler had sliced a long diagonal along the pad, and it stung, but it was a nice sort of sting. “One time I got locked out of my house in the middle of winter.”

Fundy winced. “You lose your key or something?”

“Nah,” he said, “My mom wouldn’t open the door for me. I felt like I was turning blue.”

There was a pregnant pause. Tommy looked up from the bandage along his thumb and saw Fundy looking at him. Niki and Eret glanced at each other.

“What?” Tommy asked.

The silence stretched, pulled taut, and then snapped, and the world jolted back into motion. Niki resumed scraping briskly at the butter and flour caked onto the counter. Fundy’s gaze turned back to the Detroit game, where the score was still stuck at seventeen-nil. Tommy waited to see if any of them would say something, but no one did, except for Eret, who said, “Think it’s time to turn the oven down, Niki.”

“Oh, yes,” Niki said, “It’s been fifteen minutes, of course,” and she turned away, hiding her face. Tommy had the awful feeling he had said something wrong and no one was telling him what it was. He felt his face go hot with an unknowable shame.

“I’m going to take a walk,” he said suddenly, and pushed himself to his feet. Fundy’s eyebrows crawled together and he said, “Tommy, wait a minute,” but Tommy stuck his hands in his pockets and pushed his way out of the door.

The apartment building was carpeted in hexagons of red and orange. Tommy made sure to step evenly in each one as he paced down the stairway. His chest was tight. He did not know why.

He always felt like this whenever he did something wrong. He seemed to make mistakes all the time. As if he could never do anything right. He was thinking about Niki’s face. What had he said that hurt her so badly?

He pushed open the door to the stairway leading to the ground floor and paused. There were voices, echoing up through the grey stairs.

“No,” someone was saying, a voice Tommy recognized. It was Wilbur. “It’s going fine, you know it is.”

“Right.” Skeptical. Tinged with humor. Phil’s voice.

“I’m serious,” Wilbur’s voice insisted. “He was fine the last time I checked in on him.”

“Right.”

“And I keep telling him, all he needs to do is sleep more. That’s it. I don’t even know why he’s here right now when he’s working tonight.”

“You try getting him to take a break.”

“I *have*. It never works.”

“How long did he say he’d be gone?”

“Just a smoke break. Speaking of that— what happened to you making him quit?”

“He’s a stubborn bastard. And I’m not in control of him. Never have been.” Phil’s tone was contemplative. Wilbur paused. Tommy stood, hand on the door, silent.

“So where are you looking now?”

“Sunnyvale. It’s in California.”

Wilbur whistled. “Shit.”

“I know.”

“That’s far.” Phil made a wordless noise. Wilbur sighed. “More opportunities, huh.”

“You should think about it. Come on, mate, don’t give me that. You have to have something lined up when you pull the plug.”

“I still have to deal with the fallout when I tell Tommy,” said Wilbur. Tommy stood wordlesse and said nothing. “He’s the lynchpin right now.”

Phil let out a slow breath through his teeth. One of them stood up, paced around the stairwell. When he spoke next, Wilbur’s voice was distant, like he had taken a few steps down. “I’m going to go find Techno. He’s probably at the corner store. Gotta stop him before he buys another pack.”

Tommy had heard enough. He had no idea what precisely Wilbur and Phil were talking about, but he felt intrusive hearing it, and his stomach curled at hearing his name out loud. He felt dizzy. Silently he closed the door behind him.

All three men— Wilbur, Techno, Phil— returned half an hour later as the turkey came steaming out of the oven. Techno, nose pink from the cold, helped Niki carve it while everyone else set the table. Tommy looked at Wilbur across the table, who looked back as if nothing was wrong. Tommy wanted to ask what Wilbur was keeping secret, but he held his tongue.

Dinner that night was large and grand and delicious and also one of the worst meals Tommy had ever had. He couldn’t exactly hold his fork very well when his thumb hurt too much to bend. But he still methodically and slowly ate his way through sour cream mashed potatoes and maple-roasted brussel sprouts and turkey, white and dark meat both, and sweet potato casserole with browned marshmallows on top. There was creamy green bean casserole and

buttery peas and thick, rich gravy. Conversation was loud and talkative and people fought back and forth over the most ridiculous things. At one point it devolved into a full-blown argument over which Nancy Reagan film was the best. Privately Tommy thought all of them were rather shit, and when he finally burst and said that, Phil snorted so hard a green bean nearly came out of his nose.

In spite of everything that happened, it was a good night. It was a warm night. He forgot about the stairwell conversation and the discomfort of his thumb and the wrong steps made. It was one of those nights where it was full of family, blood or not, and Tommy thought he might have liked to stay in that moment forever; hung in the knowledge that there was a golden, vast world out there, and Techno had been right, that he was young, so very young, and he had only managed the smallest taste of all there was to see.

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Because Second Chances was a bookstore for both used and new books, Tommy found himself enjoying the quiet secrets that people could find in used books. People wrote all sorts of notes in the margins and kept all sorts of things between the pages. They wrote their secrets or quotes they wanted to remember or even old family recipes, scrawled down desperately in a moment of memory. Some people used books as their diaries. Other people wrote reminders. *Dinner at 6:30 with Samantha*. Tommy did not know who the original writer was or who Samantha was, but he hoped their dinner together had gone well. Other people used books for their keepsakes. More than once Tommy opened a book to find that someone had pressed a bouquet between the pages; each flower and leaf was dried and preserved perfectly.

He began to know Second Chances like the back of his well-worn hand. He could navigate through it like Wilbur could, eyes closed, avoiding crashing into the bookshelves by pure sense-memory alone. He knew the best places to sit while reading—the cushy armchair hidden in the True Crime section, the old bathtub Wilbur had renovated into a seating area by filling it with blankets and cushions, the alcove underneath the staircase leading into the Political Thriller room that had a dim light bulb screwed into the steps above. He began reading more, a lot more. Wilbur was pleased about this. When he visited Techno and Phil's place for the occasional dinner, they were pleased about it as well. He read Steinbeck's *The Pearl* and *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and *Of Mice and Men*, which made Tommy cry embarrassing, sobbing tears at the end of it. He got halfway through *Hamlet* before losing his mind with boredom, but stuck it out for the entirety of *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. Before he knew it, one afternoon Wilbur was saying to him, "I thought you hated reading."

"Guess it's different when you don't have a teacher telling you what shit you have to do," Tommy fired back, which made Wilbur beam, which made something dark and vibrant spark to life in his chest. He could not name what it was.

Slowly but surely, Tommy began to carve out a space for himself in Baileyville, Maine. People began to know his name and wave to him when he walked down the street. He was a welcome presence in every shop along Main Street. People expected him to be at the front

desk when they walked through the wooden door of Second Chances. The guy who worked early mornings at the bakery always had two scones set aside for him and Wilbur, fresh out of the oven. The corner deli always pressed his ham and cheese sandwich extra flat just the way Tommy wanted. Even Enya, the bookstore cat, meowed when Tommy showed up. He bought her a can of tuna that she ate from until her stomach bulged out.

Wilbur was a welcome companion and a fun flatmate to have. They were steadily learning how to cook food that was actually edible together. They stayed up late watching *Dallas* and reruns of *Scooby-Doo*.

Tommy often wondered, albeit distantly, if his parents missed him. If his classmates missed him. If his teachers missed him. If they had alerted the authorities in any way, or if Tommy had simply vanished into thin air. Did they think about him? He had no idea.

One morning, deep into the broad muscle of December, Tommy woke up late to find there was a new sign plastered on the window front of Second Chances, and another sign plastered to the front desk. *Everything Half Off. Final Sale.*

“Wilbur,” Tommy asked. Something rotten was churning in his stomach. “The fuck is that sign?”

Wilbur looked confused before his face cleared. “Oh! That. Remember— how long ago was it— I told you I was short on mortgage. Well, ah. We’re a bit short on everything. Sort of a negative profit, you could say. So— everything is half off. We’re closing up.”

Tommy did not understand. “How is that helping to make money?”

Wilbur’s face twisted. “Well, we’ll see how it goes. Not much use in keeping a business up that loses money.”

Tommy blinked. “What?”

“We’ll see if the fundraiser does any good. But we’ll be lucky if we make it to June next year.”

Tommy still did not understand. “But... What’ll happen? Is the bookstore going to...”

Wilbur nodded. Tommy said *oh*, very quietly.

Wilbur continued on. “I’ve been thinking about it a bit recently. If we do end up closing, we’ll probably package the books up and donate them to the school here. Or do a big sale. I don’t think anyone will buy the building so I suppose it’ll just go empty once we move out.”

Like the laundromat that had closed a few blocks down on Main Street. Emptied and gutted and covered with those white plastered signs over the windows that did nothing to hide how empty it was inside. Tommy didn’t know if he could bear to see Second Chances turn into that.

Tommy looked at Wilbur, a wound-up ball of tension, and realized that this was the secret he had been hiding from Tommy. This was the fallout he was unprepared to deal with. He

swallowed and asked, “How much money do we need to keep it afloat?”

Wilbur laughed. “Don’t say stupid things.”

That made Tommy burn with familiar, long-hidden rage. “It’s not stupid. I’m asking. I’m an employee, I work here too. Give me an answer.”

Wilbur appraised him. “About ten thousand dollars by next month.”

The number made Tommy’s stomach drop. Ten thousand dollars was a lot of money. Tommy thought about his peak savings at one point, before he had begun earning a wage— one hundred and twenty, hidden in various spots around his room. Before his mother had found it all. But that wasn’t even five percent of what they might need to keep afloat.

He thought about all the money in his bank account. His paycheck each week was about a hundred and thirty dollars every Tuesday. He had worked at Second Chances since October, which came to a grand total of around seven hundred dollars, given his occasional spendings. Every time Tommy thought about that number something in his chest did a funny flip. He would have given everything he owned, both his legs, to have that money when he was fifteen. He knew other kids his age wanted it for new shoes, or headphones, or shiny vinyl records. But every day Tommy would look at the newspapers and see how much a bus ticket cost to go across the world. Seven hundred dollars would have changed his entire life.

He swallowed the desire down. “Wilbur,” he said, “Can I write you a check?”

“What? *No*. No, Tommy, no.”

“Please,” he said. He had the white checkbook Techno had purchased him and everything. He could make up almost ten percent of what Second Chances needed. “Let me.”

“No,” Wilbur said firmly, seriously. “Listen, Toms. Everything has got to end at some point. If it goes on forever you lose what made it special.” He straightened up and rolled his shoulders back. “The only good thing about life is that it ends.”

Tommy’s stomach twisted. “Not sure if that’s a good thing for you to say, Will. Knowing your history and all.”

“Not like that. I mean— it’s good that it ends. Imagine you’re immortal, right? If you’re immortal, anything that ever meant something becomes nothing. Every experience can be had again. You never get anything special or real. But we’re not immortal. We’ve got an ending, and everything ends. It makes each moment precious and special and essential. You’ll never find something like that if you’re clinging onto it all.”

It exploded out of Tommy. “This is such bullshit! Why are you just giving up?”

“I’m not giving up.”

“Yes, you are!” cried Tommy. “You live here, you work here, you own this whole place. And you won’t let anyone help it. You’re already talking like it’s over!”



Wilbur sighed. “Tommy,” he said, “It already is. You just can’t see it yet.”

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In the third grade, Tommy’s teacher had told him, face all puffed up and red like a beet, that if he didn’t stop talking she was going to give him something to talk about. Tommy’s eyes grew wide. He clammed up and did not speak for the rest of the school day until all the words burst out of him at once like some wild, untamed thing that would not stay on its leash.

That was how he felt, then, that night in Wilbur’s place. He was angry, he realized, and it was a distant, growing anger that grew brighter like a meteorite in the night sky. He was angry that Wilbur had left all of this until the last minute and kept putting up those stupid *Half Off!* signs like it was going to help. He was angry that Wilbur refused to take his savings. He was angry that Wilbur was acting like everything was already gone, like they had already lost Second Chances to the dying small town. He was angry that Wilbur was acting helpless. He was furious that Wilbur hadn’t told him until the very last minute.

He wanted to scream about it, but the leash he kept his voice on was tighter than ever. Wilbur was his best friend, his companion, his employer, and if Tommy was being honest, halfway to becoming his brother. He did not want to lose the delicate thread tied between the two of them.

He had been avoiding Wilbur for the last few weeks, but could not avoid him any longer. That night, they all went to Niki’s place for a potluck. While Jack lived in the small apartment above The Singing Sail, Niki owned a small white house on the outskirts of town. It had a white porch with purple coneflower blossoms growing all around it. As clean as it was, Tommy could see white flour brushed across all the surfaces and kitchen towels. He could see why they hadn’t gone to her home for Thanksgiving; Niki collected china, precious vases. They were placed in beautiful cases around the entire place. Tommy was certain that if all of them had to cook a massive dinner, something would break.

Niki had fresh bread set out on the counter. It was warm with steam rising from it. Wilbur set down the dish he and Tommy had brought, garlic roasted potatoes, and went to embrace Niki. Then she ruffled Tommy’s hair. Tommy liked that. It made him feel like a kid.

The potluck meant that there were more people than their typical Friday night gatherings, around the same amount of people who had showed up for Thanksgiving. George and his British accent showed up again; Eret and Puffy and Hannah were there, and Charlie, who had made Tommy laugh so hard he nearly puked, was following them through the door. This time, Tommy recognized them all. He did not need their introductions. He realized, distantly, that everyone treated him like he was part of a family.

And he realized, too, that Wilbur’s news about the financial crisis Second Chances had welcomed itself in, and it had spread like wildfire. Wilbur must have told everyone before he told Tommy, which made things sting all the more. Techno already knew before he even

walked in the door. He pulled to a stop in front of Niki's lawn and Phil shouted out the window, "Wilbur Soot, what the fuck did you do?"

"I'm working on it," Wilbur called back, and he was running across the lawn to give Phil a hug and Techno one of those disconnected, stilted greetings, hand on shoulder. "It's all going to work out."

"You're crazy," Phil said fondly, and Techno said, "You're insane," though it was much less fond and much more judgmental.

"All's fair in love and war," said Wilbur. "Shall we go inside?"

For all the companionship and camaraderie, Tommy felt strangely disconnected. The adults poured themselves glasses of white sparkling wine and Wilbur toasted *to good endings*. Everyone lifted their glasses in celebration, even Wilbur and Tommy with their water. "To good endings!" they called, and glasses clinked. Everyone drank. Tommy stood in the center of it all. The hurricane tore around him. In the eye of the storm everything was still. It felt like he had missed an essential month of time. It felt like he had blinked and the world had transformed around him. How long had Wilbur been hiding this from him? How long had everyone else known?

The storm continued, raging inside his skull as everyone served themselves dinner. Tommy got a plate pushed into his hands and mechanically went to the counter. There was roasted chicken and pasta salad and macaroni and cheese and tomatoes with fresh mozzarella and pesto. And there, by the end of the table, was a plate piled high with sugar cookies. The sight made something bleak stopper itself in Tommy's skull.

They were thick, crumbly, and sweet; homemade, still warm. Each one was as big as Tommy's palm. Without even needing to ask, Tommy knew precisely who had brought them. He could feel Techno's gaze like a cold spotlight between his shoulder blades.

Something sour crawled into his throat and tugged it closed. His chest swelled with a hard ache. He could taste salt in all the spaces he needed to breathe. His skin was itching and raw. It was peeling away from his walls like snake skin.

At once he knew. The bookstore was going to close.

Second Chances was going to shut down.

Tommy did not care much about the job. Not really. He could stack and sort and alphabetize books at any old library he wanted. What he cared about was the place. About the old bathtub in the back that Wilbur had turned into a seating arrangement. About the hallways he could trace from memory like the ventricles in his heart. About each room and space and carpeted floor he had paced. Tommy did not want it to close. If it did he could die. Second Chances was a lifeline between him and his soul and it was hanging on by only a thread.

Tommy left his plate on the table and walked outside to sit down hard on Niki's porch. It was cold, but the first snow still hadn't arrived yet. He pulled his knees up to his chest and felt searing, wet tears drip down his face. He had nothing to grab onto except those green

overflowing weeds by the base of Niki's porch. He curled his hands down and ripped into them until his nails were sticky and green and the whole world smelled of torn grass.

He didn't notice that someone had come to sit next to him until he scrubbed at his eyes and his elbow bumped into someone. Niki was sitting with her chin perched on her knees. At once Tommy felt humiliated. He was tearing up her lawn.

"Sorry," he said, "I fucked up your lawn."

"That's okay. It's all weeds."

"I tore up some of the flowers too."

"That's okay. They're just flowers."

"They were really pretty," Tommy said. His mouth tasted like salt. "Fucking hell. I ruined them."

In response, Niki reached down and grabbed a handful of those purple flowers, with green bushy leaves, and ripped them right up from the soil. Then with her other hand she tore the stalks in two and dumped them by her feet. "Everything grows back."

"Not everything," Tommy said. "Not everything is a plant."

Niki said nothing. The silence became unbearable until Tommy sucked in a deep breath and his face crumpled. "I don't want the bookstore to close. I don't know what I'm going to do without it. I have nowhere else to go."

"Will's not going to leave you hanging. He'll work things out with you."

"That's not the point."

"I know it's not the point. If it helps, we're all going to miss Second Chances. It's something we're all feeling together."

"He told you," Tommy said. It was not a question but a statement. "He told you before he told me." Niki nodded. "Why?"

"I think that's something you've got to ask Wilbur."

"I *live* there," Tommy said indignantly. "Did he think I couldn't handle it or something? Did he think I was— too young? Too immature?"

"I don't think he thought any of those things."

"It feels like he did."

"Well," Niki said, "I think he was thinking over it for a long time. It was stressing him out. He didn't want you to feel the same things he did."

Tommy could feel his eyes stinging. His stomach churned sickly. “It didn’t work,” he said. “He did the wrong thing.”

Niki waited, and finally Tommy managed, “It’s my home.” It was the only thing he had words for.

Niki’s face was pale and concerned. She moved to place one hand on his shoulder. “Home isn’t a place. You know that, right?” Tommy shook his head mutely and Niki said, “Listen. Home is people.” She pointed to his heart. “That soft tender spot right in your chest. That’s home.”

*Home.* It made everything hurt all the more.

“Tommy,” Niki said quietly, “Home is going to stick with you. It’s never going away.”

*Home.* That familiar ache he knew like an old friend. Family, friends. That soft tender spot in his chest. Home.

“And whatever happened to you, whoever hurt you, it won’t happen again. Your home isn’t leaving. It’s only changing forms.”

He swallowed hard. Niki asked softly, “Tommy, are you okay?”

What could he possibly say? He opened his mouth but no words came out. He wanted to explain the raging sensation inside him, but when he thought about how to describe it, the only thing that came to mind was memories. He had so much kept inside his chest, so much he wanted to speak about. He wanted so badly to tell Niki about that time his mother backhanded him across the face so hard his tooth went wobbly, and he pushed it out with his tongue later that night. He wanted to tell her about the long nights he spent doing yard work for elderly neighbors to save money to get the hell out, before he had come home to find that his parents had found his hiding spot beneath the mattress slats and taken it all. He wanted to tell her about the purple bruise trapped between shoulder blades. About staring at his ceiling and counting sheep until he could feel nothing anymore, only the vague cottony layer between him and the pain. About whispering all the words he wasn’t allowed to say under his breath. He wanted to tell her about the times he clammed up and did not speak for months. He thought if he was able to say all that, she would understand why it wasn’t just a bookstore to him. Why it couldn’t just close. Why it would kill him if it did.

But the one time he wanted to speak and be comforted and have a friend— a sister— he could not do it.

He could not tell her.

Niki’s gaze softened. “Oh, Toms.” Tommy’s face crumpled. No one had called him *Toms* in ages. “Can I give you a hug?”

His eyes burned. He could feel his heart pounding through his body like he was made of hammered tin. He nodded once. Niki faced him and wrapped two arms around his neck and pulled him into her shoulder. He could feel her heart beating. She smelled like that sweet

floral perfume and cigarette smoke and something sharper, like spilled liquor. Her hair dangled over his shoulder.

“I never had a sister before,” Tommy said, muffled into her sweater. She said nothing and only squeezed him tighter.

“Siblings,” Niki said, “Are some of life’s greatest pleasures.”

He laughed wetly. “I think there are a lot of people who would disagree with that. Mostly people with siblings.”

“Shh,” she said, and pulled away. Tommy reached down and pulled up another wad of flowers, fingers green and sticky. He tore them into pieces, and Niki did the same. “Do you want to go back inside? Everyone’s eating, you know.”

Tommy shook his head. He loved everyone inside but he was afraid that if he saw Wilbur or Techno or anyone he was going to burst into shards of glass. He could feel that thing inside of him straining at its leash.

“I can bring food out here,” Niki said, “One moment,” and she was gone. She returned a moment later with a plate piled high with a bit of everything, including one of those massive sugar cookies. It made Tommy feel sick.

“It’s so stupid,” Tommy scowled when she sat back down. “I think Wilbur is an idiot.”

Niki nodded. “He can be awful at times.”

“He doesn’t even know what he’s losing. This is what happens when people get too many good things all at once. He’s taking it for granted. He’s ruining everything. You know, I bet he could find those ten thousand dollars somewhere. The bank would help! I think this whole town would fundraise to help! Every single person I know has been in Second Chances at one point. It’s all bullshit. It’s all fucking stupid!”

Niki waited patiently for him to run himself dry. Tommy glared down at the plate of food and said, “If he won’t do it, I’ll do it for him.”

“What?”

The decision was made in an instant. He was not going to stand around and watch it happen. He had stood around before, had been passive, had let things happen to him. He had never taken control of things before. But at once he saw the opportunity in front of him, gleaming and bright. The world was right there, waiting for him to shape it like putty.

“I’m going to raise the money,” Tommy realized. “I’m going to make those ten thousand dollars somehow.”

Niki’s expression was skeptical, but something in her eyes was strangely hopeful. “That’s a big task.”

“I know. I’m going to do it.”

She hummed. "Can I tell you a story?"

He nodded.

"I heard this one from a friend," she said. "There once was a cat who had two children. She loved one of them but neglected the other. They grew up as opposites. But when they became full adults, the one who was loved was smothered by all the love. It had no room to grow on its own." She reached down and pulled up a fistful of grass. "But the one who was neglected had all the room in the world to thrive."

"That's a shit story," said Tommy.

Niki smiled sadly. "Yeah. It is."

She reached down and pulled up another fistful of grass. Tommy did the same. All he could smell was the sticky, damp earth. All of it was green.

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That night he went back with Wilbur, and neither of them spoke a word to one another. In the morning, Tommy swallowed down the fear. He had no idea how he was going to raise over nine thousand dollars on his own without any help. He had nowhere to go. But he could see the future in front of him, ready and willing. Tommy would seize it by the horns and shape it.

He began alphabetizing the Young Adult Fiction section when snow first trickled down outside. It kept falling, which meant that for the sleepy town of Baileyville, the holiday season had officially started. The snow settled like soft fluff from feathers, and after only a few hours, Main Street looked as though someone had pulled the sky down in blanketfolds and carpeted the whole lane in stars. The whole town came alive with a glimmering, white flair.

Tommy had never been a fan of the holidays much. The winter break always meant that he was stuck at home all day, without school as an escape. His classmates always returned from Christmas talking excitedly about the new shoes and coats and puppies they had found waiting underneath the Christmas tree. Tommy recalled long days of waiting in the heat of a corner deli in Boston, which opened late on Christmas morning, and treating himself by paying fifty cents for a chocolate bar. That was his Christmas. That was his holiday. No one at school understood when he told them that he was glad to be back taking classes. Why would he be? No one else was.

But he found that holidays in Baileyville were very different. The whole town came alive with fervor. On his walk around town some days he found menorahs, polished bronze and silver, with candles winking softly in window sills. String lights settled over the town like stars. Tommy played a quick game of dreidel with the man who ran the coffee shop and earned himself two chocolate coins for it. They were selling warm eggnog each morning, so Tommy brought Wilbur a cup of it back. It was sweet, rich, heady with warmth. He and

Wilbur had settled into a routine like two revolving twin stars. Tommy was still upset with him, and Wilbur knew that. But neither of them breached the topic.

Tommy chose to take matters into his own hands. That afternoon he went to the bank and inquired about taking out a loan. The bank teller told him that he needed to be eighteen. Still, he was able to check the money inside his own account. If he wanted to put his savings into a high-interest account, the bank teller told him, he could do that.

But Tommy did not. Instead, he wrote a check for all the money in his account to one Wilbur Soot, kept it safely in his pocket, turned on his heel, and left.

Wilbur was sitting at the front desk, fingers tapping. He did not look up when Tommy walked in. "I've been thinking," he said without preamble, "And I want to apologize."

"Okay," Tommy said.

"I'm sorry for not telling you we were financially struggling."

"Okay," Tommy said again.

Wilbur grimaced. He pushed at his glasses. "Do you know how I started working at Second Chances?"

"Luck?" Tommy guessed. Wilbur shook his head.

"The guy who owned it before me was old. Generations old. He grew up in Baileyville, his parents grew up in Baileyville, and their parents grew up in Baileyville. He knew every street like the back of his hand. His family had owned Second Chances for generations. But when he died, he had no living relatives. So he passed it onto me."

"That's nice," Tommy said. He was not sure how to make sense of the emotions in his stomach.

"What I'm trying to say is that it feels like I'm failing," Wilbur said. "Like I'm losing something that matters."

"You are."

"I know," Wilbur sighed. "I mean that I feel like I have a *responsibility*."

"Yeah," Tommy said. The anger burned brighter. "You should have told me. Not only are you letting that whole guy's family down but you're also letting *me* down. I live here. I work here. It's my life too, you know."

"I'll never get that."

He burned white-hot. "Get what?"

"Why," Wilbur said. It was vague. Tommy waited for him to elaborate until he did. "Why would you want to move here of all places?"

“You know why,” Tommy said.

“I know that it’s because Techno’s here and you were looking for him,” Wilbur agreed. “But I’ll never understand why you stayed. Do you know how much a cross-continental train ticket costs from here to California? One hundred and thirty-five dollars. Just one hundred and thirty-five dollars for you to start an entirely new life in— Oregon, maybe. Or Seattle. I’ve heard the weather in Seattle is nice.”

“I don’t want to move to Seattle,” Tommy said, “And I don’t care how much money a train ticket costs.” In his head he could hear Niki’s voice, pointing at his chest and the guarded place inside. “I like it here.”

“You’re so strange,” said Wilbur. There was not a hint of reproach or judgment in his voice. So Tommy said, “Thank you,” though he did not know what he was thanking Wilbur for.

Wilbur sighed. He took his glasses off and rubbed the sleeve of his sweater over him. He swallowed. Tommy, politely, looked away. He saw the red flush creeping up Wilbur’s cheeks and did not want to make him any more uncomfortable than he was.

Like it was practiced, Wilbur said, “I’m really sorry for not telling you. It was wrong.”

“Did Phil tell you to say that?”

“I *may* have asked him for advice.”

He had apologized only moments prior, but the second apology made something in Tommy’s chest crack. Something dim and luminous shone through.

“It’s okay,” he said, and meant it. “I’ll figure out a way to keep it alive.”

Wilbur looked at him. His eyebrows knitted together. “No, you won’t.”

“Yes, I will.”

“You shouldn’t,” Wilbur clarified. “I’ve thought about it, and I know it’s not worth it.”

Tommy stared at him. He opened his mouth to say something, but realized at once that Wilbur did not want to press the issue. In fact, it was hurting him just as much as it was hurting Tommy. Something painful and dark and deep inside him.

Something was suddenly made very clear in Tommy’s mind. It came upon him in such a bright flash of realization that he could not recognize how he had not thought of it before.

It wasn’t that Wilbur did not want to save Second Chances. He did. He wanted to save it. He wanted to keep the bookstore alive more than anything. Almost anything. But he put himself first. And he, and everything *he* entailed, came at the cost of the heart of Baileyville.

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Hanukkah came and went. Menorahs disappeared from windows, and windows went dark. Other windows were filled with Christmas trees, green and bristly. One afternoon Wilbur disappeared into the upstairs apartment for a few hours and came back with dust and tinsel coating his clothes. He lugged a massive plastic box behind him.

“Christmas decorations,” he said by way of explanation.

“Are we putting up a tree?”

“Maybe,” Wilbur said. “Do you want to?” At Tommy’s lukewarm response, Wilbur shrugged. “Okay. I want to.”

“I’m not religious,” Tommy said.

“Neither am I.”

Tommy stared at him. “Then why do you want to put a tree up?”

“Because it’s pretty,” Wilbur said simply. “And I like the smell of pine. Do you really not want one up? We don’t have to decorate if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t care,” Tommy said, and that was that. Wilbur left Tommy alone and drove his tiny orange car thirty minutes to the nearest town to strap a Christmas tree to the roof. They could have chopped one down from the forest around Baileyville— there were plenty of trees to pick from— but Second Chances did not have much space at all. They barely had enough space for a tree as was.

Tommy busied himself with stringing up tinsel across the bookshelves and hanging blue-pink-green ornaments in the windowsills while Wilbur strung golden lights over the tree. The whole business was simple. By the time they were done only an hour had passed since Wilbur had returned. Second Chances felt small and homey, lit alight from within.

That night they went early to The Singing Sail. Business at the bookstore was quiet, and Niki and Jack had respectfully asked everyone for help with decorating the bar for the upcoming holidays. When Wilbur and Tommy arrived, there was already a massive tree in the corner. It was so tall it brushed the ceiling. Jack’s arms were scratched up from manhandling it into the room. Wilbur and Tommy helped for the first few minutes. But Wilbur could sense that Tommy did not want to be involved in decorating. Once Techno and Phil arrived, Wilbur poked Tommy on the shoulder and motioned. “Billiards?”

Tommy had never played before. He twisted the cue stick between his hands and watched as Wilbur broke the triangle, then lined up for a first shot. He hit the cue ball with force and watched as it ricocheted without knocking a single ball into a pocket. “I’m not good at this,” Wilbur said, amused. “Go for it.”

Tommy was also no good at billiards. He thought he might have been better than Wilbur, but he was wrong. Where Wilbur at least managed to hit the ball in the correct direction, Tommy

failed.

“Oh, jeez,” Jack called, “You’re holding the stick wrong. Someone go help him out.”

A ripple of laughter burst through the group. Tommy scowled. Techno heaved a deep sigh and disentangled himself from tinsel to come over. “I’m on your team now,” he said, “Here’s how you hold it. Like this.”

Wilbur protested. “I’ll lose if I’m against you.”

“Afraid of being a sore loser?” Tommy cut back. The look Wilbur gave the two of them made the corner of Techno’s lips quirk up.

“Fine,” Wilbur scowled. “It’ll be good practice.”

Tommy stood back and watched as Techno methodically lined up his shot and hit one, two, three of the balls neatly into the pockets, before finally drawing a blank and passing the turn over to Wilbur. Tommy heard Jack mutter in the background. “He really is good at everything. It’s unfair.”

“Practice makes perfect,” Techno said.

“Fuck off,” Jack replied cheerfully. “Tommy, we’re saving the star for you if you want to do it when we’re done.”

Tommy glanced over. The star, a five-pointed gold topper, was waiting on the freshly-waxed bar. He nodded and turned his attention back to the game. In half an hour, Techno, who was indeed good at everything, whittled his selection of balls down to two— only the eight-ball and the two-ball. Wilbur had four left. It took one strong, directed hit from Techno to bag the two-ball. He angled his next shot towards the eight-ball.

“Tom,” Jack said, “You wanna do the star?”

Tommy glanced between the billiards table, Wilbur standing and watching Techno sweep him off the board, and back to Niki, Jack, and Phil, next to the green-red-gold of the tree.

“Okay,” Tommy said, voice suddenly unstable. “I’ll do it.” Niki handed it to him, and he clambered up the rickety step-stool.

*Clack.*

Techno hit the cue ball. Wilbur made a noise behind him. Whether of excitement, surprise, or disappointment, Tommy did not know. He did not turn around to see whether Techno won the game or not. Instead he capped the tree, clambered back down, and looked at it.

“Wonderful,” Niki said. She sounded breathless. “Well, I think that’s it!”

The Singing Sail had come to life with the holiday spirit, glowing and golden. It would open for the evening rush in an hour. Tommy looked back at the billiards table. Wilbur and Techno were sorting everything back into starting positions. Wilbur grinned at Tommy.

“Good game,” he said. “I’ll let you have the win.”

Although he had won in name only, it felt like a win in spirit. Tommy helped Techno set all the balls back into the triangle and took the cue stick back. His voice sounded stronger.

“Okay,” he said, “Now teach me how to play for real.”

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When Tommy asked what everyone planned to do for Christmas, he received various answers.

“Caroling,” Fundy responded first. “We go door to door and sing.”

“We do not,” Jack said crossly, and Wilbur called from across the room, “Hark how the bells!”

“Sweet silver bells,” Techno sighed. “No one can sing except for Wilbur.”

“I refuse to go caroling,” said Tommy.

“Fundy’s lying,” added Phil. “We’ll probably go to Niki’s place and have Christmas dinner together.”

Her voice was apologetic. “I’m going to New York for the holidays this year.”

“New York? Like New York City?”

“Queens,” Niki said ruefully. “It’s where my parents live.”

Techno looked around. “Are the rest of you leaving too?”

They already knew that George, who often stayed in one of the small, rural towns surrounding Baileyville for weeks at a time, was flying back to London to celebrate the New Year with his family. He had said it over a vodka lemon, which made his ears bright red and his words looser than usual. As Tommy found out that afternoon, Niki would be leaving as well. So would Fundy, Eret, and Jack; that would leave Baileyville empty and still. The Singing Sail would be closed from Christmas Eve to New Years, opening up again on January ninth when Niki and Jack returned.

The few people who were not leaving were Wilbur, who said that he had no family anywhere else, Phil, who said that his family was right there with him, and Techno, who said that he had no interest in seeing family at all. It would be the four of them celebrating the holidays together. No caroling, no large dinners. Tommy paced the streets of Baileyville and silently mourned the companionship. It was quiet. He had not realized how quiet things were when the town was asleep like this.

On Christmas Eve Tommy fell asleep with a stone in his chest. He wondered if he would wake up to presents underneath the tree or not. He certainly hadn't gotten any presents for Wilbur. But he did not wake up to that. What he woke up to was white.

A whiteout.

The world outside the small window in his room was white. When he went to the kitchen, the world outside those larger windows was white. Still in his pajamas, he padded down the stairs to Second Chances. From the front desk he could see the wide windows that looked out onto the street. The whiteout was so dense he could not even see the sidewalk. Just blank, endless white mist. He pressed his hand against the glass and watched his breath fog up the cold glass. The weather showed no sign of relenting. It was going to be a day for wind and snow.

He went back upstairs and dragged his blanket from his bed. "Will!" he called. "Wake up. Christmas!"

There was no sound. Tommy scowled. Leave it to Wilbur to sleep in on what might be Tommy's first good Christmas. He knocked at his door and poked his head inside.

There was no motion.

Only Wilbur, staring, unblinkingly, at the wall.

It was happening again, Tommy realized. *It was happening again.* His stomach coiled itself into a circle, a snake eating its own tail. He was drawn so tight he thought he would snap. It was happening again and he did not know what to do.

"Call Techno." His own voice startled him. He moved to the landline and looked through the phone book until he found *Watson, Phil*. The line rang. Tommy waited four whole rings before it clicked. Phil's sleepy voice sounded through the line.

"Hello?"

"Is Techno there?"

There was a pregnant pause. When Phil spoke next he sounded more awake. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes," Tommy said, "Wilbur needs Techno." Quickly he added, "Please."

"There's a storm," Phil said, "I don't know if— well, I'll have to come too. Is that okay?"

Tommy glanced over at Wilbur's bedroom door. "Yes."

"We'll be there soon," Phil said. "Merry Christmas." He did not sound very merry at all.

It took forty-five minutes for Techno and Phil's car to arrive at the front door of Second Chances. Tommy unlocked the door when he heard multiple knocks at it. Techno pushed past him the second it opened. There was snow in his hair. Phil followed.

“Merry Christmas,” Tommy mumbled. Techno vanished up the stairs. Phil shook the snow from his coat and echoed the greeting back to him.

“Techno is a bad driver,” Phil said. “It’s good that there were no other cars on the road.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Sorry,” he said again.

Phil switched tracks. “Have you opened presents yet?” Tommy shook his head. He hadn’t gotten anyone presents, and there was nothing beneath their small tree. Phil continued, “Techno and I got presents for both of you but we didn’t bring them. You’ll have to open them another time.”

“That would be nice.”

“Techno picked them out,” Phil said. “He likes to act like he’s gruff and closed-off but he’s very tender-hearted.” Phil’s gaze looked up. “As you can tell.”

Tommy felt like he had to explain. “I wouldn’t have called if I knew what to do.”

“I know. You’re a kid. You shouldn’t be expected to deal with all of this.”

Tommy’s chest tightened. “I’ve dealt with shit before.”

“But you—” He cut himself off. “Mate, you’re seventeen. This isn’t your responsibility.”

“I never said it was.”

“But you’re thinking it,” Phil said, “Right?”

Tommy’s diaphragm contracted. His eyes stung. “I know it’s not my fault,” he said, “I know that,” but the swelling sensation in his chest pushed everything else away, and he was pressing his palms to his face in a futile attempt to stop the tears.

“Hey. Hey, it’s okay.”

“Fuck.” He wiped his eyes. “Shit. Fuck. Sorry.”

“Wilbur’s okay,” Phil said. Tommy’s next breath was a shuddering, shaky one. “He’s got Techno, right? He’s got me. It’s going to be okay. This is just because of the store closing, you know. Worrying about money always makes things worse. Once he moves onto something new it’ll all work out. It’ll be okay.”

Tommy’s nose was running. He and Phil went to sit in the apartment, and Tommy locked himself in the bathroom for five minutes to wash his face. When he emerged Phil was busy making breakfast. That was something he did when he was stressed— doing things for other

people. The two of them ate in silence. After ages, Techno joined them from Wilbur's room. He pulled out a carton of cigarettes.

"Do either of you mind?"

Tommy did mind, but he said nothing. Techno lit up a cigarette and let the smoke curl out from his mouth. His other hand was fidgeting by his side. He only made it halfway through the first cigarette before he stubbed it out, flicked it away, and lit up another one.

"Merry Christmas," Techno said, after a horrible, smeared-out silence. "Is there coffee?"

Phil poured him a cup. And the three of them did not speak for a long, long time.

Tommy was eerily reminded of an exercise his teachers had once made the class do in the fifth grade. She had brought everyone out onto the yard and commanded them to stand in a circle, stick their right hand in, grab someone else's hand, and then repeat with their left. When they were stood, pressed shoulder to shoulder, like one many-limbed, octopus-like creature, she had said, *now untangle yourselves without letting go*.

Tommy had been the one to let go first. His palms were sweaty and his stomach hurt and he hated being pressed next to people and he wanted to stop the nausea that was rising in his throat. The class had hated him for it. They had been halfway untangled, and there Tommy was, ruining everything for them. Tommy was not good at solving problems. He tended to create problems more than he fixed them.

His teacher had called it the human knot. Apparently it was solvable, though the class never managed to do it. But now, Tommy could imagine Techno, Wilbur, and Phil, standing in a triangle shoulder to shoulder, hands clasped, unable to know which way would twist their shoulder just a bit too much.

"He's fine," Techno said into the silence. He tossed the second cigarette butt into the trash and lit up a third. Phil made a noise low in his throat. Tommy hated the smell. The wind howled outside. "In case you were wondering."

Tommy spoke quietly. "Sorry for calling."

"Don't apologize." Tommy opened his mouth again, but Techno's voice was full of venom. "I said don't apologize. Shut up."

"Techno," Phil warned.

He stood up and paced around the room. His motions were jerky. "Sorry for snapping."

"It's okay."

"It's not," Techno said. "Fuck. None of this is okay." He turned to Phil. "When were you going to tell me you want to move to California?"

Phil seemed at a loss for words. "What?"

“Will told me,” Techno accused. “I thought we were working on moving out together. Not alone.”

“We are.”

“Which is why you told Wilbur before me.”

Phil looked over at Tommy and sighed. “Not here, Tech. Not now.”

“Fuck!” Techno said again, and coffee splashed over the rim of his mug. “That’s not good enough.”

Then Techno was saying *I can’t do this anymore* out loud, and Tommy was struck with the sudden realization that the three of them were caught in a tangled web of their own creation. They were tangled so tightly they could not see which way would loosen the knot and which would pull the knot tighter. Tommy needed one of them to let go.

“I get it,” he said out loud, and both Techno and Phil stopped talking, turning to him.

“Get what?” Phil asked.

“Why you want to leave so badly,” said Tommy. He turned to Techno. “And why you can’t go.”

“Right,” said Techno. “Sure, you get it.” His tone was full of skepticism. “I’m going to go before I say something I’ll regret.”

“You need to let go!” Tommy blurted. “You’re like a human knot. An octopus. One of you needs to let go or you’re all going to suffocate from it.”

Phil stared strangely at him. So did Techno. “You don’t get it at all,” was all he said, after a long moment of silence. But Tommy did get it. He understood. He understood that they were rotating each other like stars on a collision course for one another. Tommy opened his mouth to argue, but someone else cleared their throat from the doorway.

Wilbur stood there. “Hi,” he said. “Phil, did you make pancakes?”

Wordlessly Phil held the plate out to him. Wilbur poured himself a cup of coffee, sat down in his sleep shirt and pajama bottoms, and began eating. Techno finished smoking his third cigarette and finally put the pack away.

“I got you all presents,” Wilbur said into the silence. He kept his face ducked. It was obvious he did not want to talk about the events of the morning. “We can open them later if you want.”

“It’s Christmas morning,” Techno said bluntly. “We should open them now.”

“Only if you want.”

Techno fixed his gaze on the ceiling. Wilbur stared into the dregs of his coffee cup like it could swallow him whole. Tommy felt like a lone point in isolation. Watching a car crash in slow motion.

“Okay,” Phil said. “Presents. Presents first, and we’ll go from there.”

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The rest of the day passed smoothly. Tommy emerged with a new winter coat, a Walkman, and a pair of good headphones. He curled up in the old bathtub with his blanket, still in his pajamas, and read *A Wrinkle in Time* with Enya sleeping in his lap. The whiteout lasted all through the afternoon and late into the evening, and it was only at around ten when Phil said it was safe enough to drive back. He and Techno waved Wilbur and Tommy goodbye at the door, and just like that, Christmas was snuffed out in a blast of cold snow.

Tommy closed the book but he could not drag his thoughts away from the events of that morning. He could hear Wilbur pattering around above him. He could tell that Wilbur was embarrassed. His embarrassment was a live presence in the bookstore. Slowly it dawned on Tommy that Wilbur was avoiding him. So he confronted him about it.

Wilbur, methodically scrubbing at dishes in the kitchen, did not respond for a long moment. He kept his head down as he said, “I don’t like making people feel disappointed. But I do it all the time.”

“Well, it’s scary,” Tommy said. “When you get like that.”

“I know.”

“And it really scares Techno. And Phil. You know, I think he likes to pretend that he doesn’t care but he really does.”

“I know,” Wilbur said miserably. The sponge splashed into soapy water. “I’m working on it.” He looked remarkably young when he turned back around. It struck Tommy that Wilbur was only a few years older than him. They were not separated by age in the same way he and his parents were. In another world they could have been brothers.

Tommy dared to ask, “Is this because Second Chances is shutting down?”

Wilbur winced. “Don’t say it like that.”

Tommy had no idea how else to say it. He waited until Wilbur gave him a response. “Sort of,” he said, “I guess it’s that I’m letting everybody down. Disappointing them all.”

He let the water run another moment longer before shutting it off. Tommy fidgeted in the silence until a thought struck him. “Wilbur,” he asked, “When you go—” he made a motion that did not at all resemble what Wilbur became when his mind stopped functioning and he



could no longer get out of bed, but it was close enough that Wilbur understood entirely. “What happens? Where do you go?”

Now Wilbur was the one to look down. “It’s like I don’t exist in the real world,” he said. “It feels like I’m playing an arcade game with no wires inside. I keep trying to move the joystick to get me, the character, to move. But the character never does. It’s waiting for the right wires to tell it where to go but those wires don’t exist. So it never moves.”

Tommy could not entirely understand. But Wilbur spoke with a hint of mourning in his voice. As if he was speaking of an old friend, or describing something deep and beautiful and great.

“Is that why you can’t get out of it?”

“I try,” admitted Wilbur. “I’m not very good at it.”

“Techno’s good at getting you out of it.” Wilbur nodded in agreement. Tommy chewed at his lip. “Are other people?”

Wilbur closed his eyes. He took a breath in. “That’s the thing,” he said. “They’re not.”

It went unspoken. He and Techno relied on each other.

In silence Wilbur went back to scrubbing at the dishes. Tommy came over and helped to dry them. In silence they worked together. In silence they finished washing up, the world still white outside. Into the silence, Wilbur said, “Phil wants to move to California.”

Tommy had known that before that morning, because he had overheard Wilbur and Phil talking about it in the stairwell during Thanksgiving. He did not mention the eavesdropping. Wilbur continued, “Baileyville is a dying town. Every paper in America likes to talk about it. Not Baileyville but every other place. The death of small town America. Everyone’s moving into the suburbs and out of the cities and small towns. They’re changing all the cities, for Chrissake. It’s growing more than ever before.”

“Is that why Phil wants to move?”

Wilbur laughed, though nothing about it was funny. “Did you know Phil is the only one out of the group who’s lived here his whole life? Went to school here, got a job here, stayed his whole life. Thirty-five years. You could call him the North Star of the group, I guess. Everyone looks up to him.” His voice grew small and sort of choked. “There was a while, well. It’s embarrassing. We used to be called father and son. Not anymore, of course.” Tommy stayed silent. “And if you know Phil at all you’ll know he hates being stuck in one place.”

“Because of Techno,” Tommy recognized.

Wilbur smiled grimly. “And then there’s me.”

Tommy understood the desire to move. The world changed around people. Sometimes while walking through the meat and muscle of Boston he swore that he still saw the ghost of places that had closed, storefronts that went shuttered and plastered up, places that no longer

existed. But they existed in his memory. Part of his life. His hometown. And Phil, stuck right in the heart of the small town, had likely seen it a thousand times over.

“One of these days,” Wilbur said. He spoke it like a prayer. “One of these days.”

Tommy could hear water dripping from the sink. A slow endless sound. He wiped it away and hung the kitchen towel up to dry.

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Wilbur let Tommy run free for the days in between Christmas Day and New Year’s Eve. Second Chances was closed the entire time so he had no work. Though they were closed, most other places on Main Street would open if he knocked. Tommy, who was working on his fear of spending money, bought himself a nice big Italian sub, one of the ones that was nearly as long as his forearm and stuffed full of salami and provolone and prosciutto. Then with the remainder of the five dollar bill he bought himself a black coffee. He hated the taste but both Techno and Wilbur drank it black. Somewhere inside him he wanted to be like them. The act made him feel more like an adult.

When he returned, Techno was standing by the door to Second Chances, hands stuffed in his pockets. There was snow on his beanie. He looked as if he had been waiting a long time.

“Tommy,” he said in lieu of a hello.

“Hi,” Tommy said. “Are you here for Wilbur?”

Techno’s mouth opened. Then it closed. “Sure,” he said. “I don’t think he’s inside, though.”

Tommy unlocked the door and let him in. It clasped behind the two of them like the valve of a heart. Techno shook the snow off his coat. “Wilbur’s been fine,” Tommy said hurriedly. “We talked about some stuff and I promise he’s fine.”

“I know,” said Techno. His voice was strained. “I actually need to tell you something.”

The urgency in his voice made Tommy’s stomach churn. He took Tommy down one of the small hallways. The walls of Second Chances seemed to close in around them both like the walls of a heart.

He tried for a joke. “Good news or bad news?”

Techno did not waste any time. “Your mother called me this morning.”

It was as if someone had kicked all the air out of Tommy’s lungs. “Okay,” he said, the only thought he could form. It was not okay at all. “Okay. That’s— oh. Okay.” He repeated it as if it could soothe the fiery burn of his insides.

“She wanted to know if you were here with me. Apparently she’s been calling every family member imaginable.”

“Okay,” Tommy said again. His heart was beating rabbit-quick.

“I told her you weren’t here,” Techno said.

His heart skipped. He could not breathe for a moment. Tommy stared at his older cousin.

“And— what did she say?”

“I don’t know if she believed me. But she said thank you for letting her know, and then she hung up.”

An awful ache swelled in Tommy’s chest. Techno continued, “I wanted to let you know, because—” His words were stopped as he fumbled for the best way to say it. “You know. I think you should know. You have the right to know.”

“Sorry,” Tommy said. His mind was reeling. “I just need a moment.”

“Hey.” Techno grabbed his arm. “You’re the one who ran away, right. You dropped out. You came here. You don’t have to go back. No one is going to make you go back.”

Tommy slid down the wall to sit with his knees to his chest. “I don’t want to go back,” he said. It was true. He didn’t. The thought of never being able to walk the damp, misty streets of Baileyville filled him with misery. He could not bear the prospect of having to leave the town behind. And people could say all they wanted about how much potential he had or how if he just dedicated himself some more he could do something great. They could talk about how wonderful his parents were when Tommy was the only one who knew what they were like behind closed doors. He did not miss Boston. He did not miss the sensation of being a single blood cell in the massive bloodstream of the city. He did not miss the invisibility.

But it was difficult to realize, out of the blue, that he still existed to them. He was still a memory in their minds. His mother still thought of him. She was looking for him. After all these months, Tommy thought he was forgettable. But he was not. It made something terrible and dark glow inside him.

“Good,” Techno was saying through the rushing in his ears. “You shouldn’t. Your mother is a right— a right *bitch* .”

That was one of the only times he had ever heard Techno swear and it was about his *mother*. He stared, mind-boggled.

“She is,” Techno defended. “I know she’s your mom and all that, but I promise you, you’re much better off without her. Especially after everything I’ve heard. Everything you’ve told me. Or really, everything you haven’t. She’d better stay the fuck away.”

“I know,” Tommy said. His voice sounded strangled. He barely recognized his own voice when he spoke. “Sometimes I still miss it though.” It felt like a betrayal to admit out loud. He

had carved out a space for himself in Baileyville and had formed a small, tight-knit family. Yet there he was admitting that he missed the very place he had tried to escape.

Techno came over and sat cross-legged on the floor next to him. “I get it,” he said. “I did the same thing as you. The second I turned eighteen I left everyone behind too.”

“Huh,” Tommy said.

“Without any guilt at all,” he added. “I was lucky and got a summer birthday, two days after I graduated from high school. I packed my bags the night before, blew out the candles on my cake the day of, and as soon as I finished the slice I put my shoes on and walked out the door.”

Tommy gaped. He imagined it, and it felt like looking into a mirror that showed Tommy’s own past. A Techno who was nearly a decade and a half younger, immature, bright with newly-minted adulthood. He imagined Techno in the same exact position that Tommy had been in: hitchhiking to the bus station, buying a ticket, boarding the bus and staring out the window until he no longer recognized the woods around him. Had Techno done just that?

He wanted to ask but he did not. He let Techno speak. “I ended up staying with a few friends for almost two years after that. I wish— well, I wish I could say that I cut everyone off and never spoke to them again. But I felt responsible. I kept going to family reunions. Everyone told me to bite the bullet and do the hard work, but I’m messed up like that. I wish I didn’t value family loyalty so much.” He did not need to explain any further. Tommy was perhaps the only person who understood precisely what Techno was feeling. Still he continued. “But the friend I was staying with came across some hard times and I had to go. Dream and I put up a map of the states and I threw a dart blindfolded at it, and guess where it landed?”

He gestured with one hand. “Baileyville, Maine,” he answered. “About as close to Canada as you can get. So I bought a train ticket here, and rented an apartment as soon as I could. And, well. That was eleven years ago.”

“Oh,” Tommy said.

“The point is,” Techno rushed, “That I get it. And that I was in your shoes for a good chunk of time. And the point is that I made it through, and you will too.”

Tommy did not trust himself to speak. One minute passed. Then another. Techno was built for anxiety; he was not built for comfort. He had done his part and Tommy struggled to keep up with that.

“Well,” Techno said. The silence had grown too big and burst like a balloon. “I wanted to let you know about your mom. Even though I know how much it hurts to hear.”

Tommy swallowed. “Thank you.”

In return, Techno peered at him. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” Tommy answered. And he was surprised to find that he *was* okay, or at the very least, making progress towards it. He was taking small, slow steps along the road to happiness. The memories of his mother were still swamping his mind, and along with those memories came the eerie sensation of seeing nothing but his old home. He could smell cigarette smoke in the air and hear *The Brady Bunch* playing on the television. His mouth tasted of microwaveable TV meals, the ones bought for fifty cents each at the supermarket. It made him feel awful: nostalgic and miserable all at once. And he would keep walking through it— step after step, day after day, until he reached whatever *okay* truly was.

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There were still only the four of them when the New Year rolled around. Techno, Wilbur, Tommy, and Phil sat in a loose semicircle in Wilbur and Tommy’s apartment to watch the ball drop in New York City. Wilbur brought up the idea of scanning the crowd to see if they could find a white stripe of Niki’s hair. One look at the packed crowd told them that it would be impossible, so they gave up.

When it was three minutes to midnight, Techno pushed himself up from the sofa and twisted open a bottle of white champagne he had brought with him. Wilbur did not own any champagne glasses, so he poured a splash into three mugs. Techno offered one to Tommy, who took it. He supposed that drinking a sip of alcohol on New Year’s Eve was to be expected. Wilbur got himself up and poured himself a glass of grape juice.

And then it was ten, nine, eight seconds to midnight, and Tommy blinked as they were carried into the New Year. All four of them grinned at each other. Tommy could feel the corners of his mouth pulling upwards. He carefully drank a sip. It was more bitter than he thought it would be, but the bubbles were bright and airy.

“To new beginnings.” Techno raised his mug. Phil did so too. Tommy and Wilbur raised their mugs, and the four of them clinked them together. All the while the snow fell thick and fast outside. On the television people were cheering and kissing each other while confetti rained down from the sky. Tommy could not think of one better place to be.

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The giddy sensation did not last. In the days that followed, he could not stop thinking about Boston. And thinking about Boston came with the inevitable curse of thinking about his mother. She lived in every waking moment and every sleeping second. He woke from a half-lucid dream in the middle of the night with his sheets soaked from sweat and barely made it to the bathroom before the contents of his stomach emptied themselves. Wilbur heard him throwing up and asked if he was okay. His throat was sore. He said he was, but he spent all of the next day lying in bed.

“Right,” Wilbur said on the second day, “I’m taking your temperature.”

“I’m not sick,” Tommy said. He knew it for fact. Still he waited with the thermometer under his tongue for thirty seconds until it beeped. He was right and Wilbur was wrong. He had no fever. Wilbur still frowned.

“What the hell do I do with you now,” he said. Tommy snorted.

“I’m just tired.”

“You’re sleeping more than *George*.”

“Huh?”

Wilbur snorted. “One time he fell asleep right in the middle of the Sail. The Sail! At midnight on a Friday night. Jack turned up the music until all our eardrums almost exploded and he still stayed asleep.”

“Impressive,” Tommy said.

“Yeah. Don’t end up like him,” said Wilbur. “Are you actually okay? Did something happen?”

He opened his mouth, intended to tell a half-true lie, but his mind was drowned out by another memory. It was the afternoon when he had first made the decision to drop out of high school. Tommy was only a junior, days over the halfway mark to graduating, but by the second day of the school year he had made his decision. It was the day that his counselor sat him down and told him quite seriously that if he did not pick his grades up that semester, he would flunk out. And did he know what happened to people who flunked out? They died. Became heroin addicts. Drunks. Died on the sidewalks in the middle of winter. Did Tommy really want that for himself? Did he want that to be his future?

He sat in the scratchy armchair and picked at his nails. He could not bring his gaze up to his counselor’s face. She was an old woman, lined with grey. Half-moon glasses were perched low on her nose. Privately Tommy thought that the session was supposed to be about him, but she looked like she was telling him her worst fears. Like he was a mirror and she was the subject.

*Dunno*, Tommy had muttered. He was silent and sullen. She frowned at him.

*You need to start looking at colleges this semester*, she said. *You know, most boys your age are looking into Yale or Princeton. Though you know as well as I do that you won’t be able to get into those.*

It stung even though Tommy knew it was a fact. He bit the inside of his lip so hard it bled. The taste was metallic and sour on his tongue. *I don’t care about my grades.*

She tsked and let him leave into the empty hallways. Every other student had already left for the day. It was there, standing at his locker, where Tommy had made the decision. He would not be receiving his high school diploma. He would never cross the stage in a cap and a

gown. He would never apply for colleges. He did not ever want to take the SAT or the ACT or any of those things. He did not want to see his counselor's stupid, smug, miserable face ever again. And he hated mathematics and physics and English classes. He hated *Canterbury Tales* and *Catcher in the Rye* and *Great Expectations*. He did not ever want to touch those books again.

Wilbur waited, and the answer spilled out of Tommy. "My mom."

"What about her?" Wilbur turned to him. "Did she visit recently?" His tone was full of alarm. "What happened?"

"She called Techno," Tommy said. His throat was stoppered. "Apparently she's looking for me. I don't know why."

Only a month and a half after that conversation with his counselor, Tommy had received a one week suspension from the principal on account of setting his backpack on fire in a trash bin. He was not allowed to return for classes. So he went to his locker, emptied it, and then went to his history teacher and said goodbye. He informed her that he would not be returning, and her face twisted into something sour and sorrowful. She wished him well, but just like Wilbur had when he first found out, she told him he was making a mistake.

Then Tommy had gone back home. Packed his bags. Took his mother's things with ruthless efficiency. He waited until she got home from work to tell her that he was leaving. A part of him wanted desperately for her to stop him, to take him by the shoulders and kiss him on each cheek and ask him to stay. But a sick, hurting part of him wanted her to let him go. To dig the knife deeper and twist it. To know just how little she cared. She had shouted at him. *Fucking selfish cunt.*

Tommy had turned and walked out the door.

She did not chase after him.

Not until the phone call a few days ago. Until she did not know whether he was okay or not. Whether he had become a suicidal junkie like his counselor had warned him he would. Whether he was alive or dead.

His voice shuddered and jumped as he told the whole story to Wilbur. Sometimes it skipped like a record player. But Wilbur listened all the way through.

"This is the same mom who gave you the bruise." It was the only thing Wilbur said at the end.

"Which bruise?" Tommy asked. He wanted to laugh, but his throat was constricted and tight. Wilbur did not seem to find his comment funny, anyway. "It's only— corporal punishment. You know, some kids need to learn from it."

"No parent should ever hit their children," Wilbur said, "And don't you dare try to convince me otherwise."

Embarrassment flushed over him. Wilbur's voice was stern. It was one of the only times Tommy had ever felt like he truly disappointed him. It was weighing heavily on him. So was the memory; he had thought saying everything out loud would cleanse him of the emotions associated, but all it did was hang like a dreadful thundercloud over his head. It was ready to pour rain down. His face screwed up.

In a voice remarkably similar to Techno, Wilbur asked, "Are you okay?"

"I don't know." Tommy was embarrassed for crying, and embarrassed for how he had to look just then, unable to control his emotions. Young, a child. Immature. "I don't want to think about it."

Wilbur considered that. Then he offered Tommy a hand. "Come on," he said, "It's stuffy in here. Let's go for a walk."

Still in thin pajamas but covered by a warm winter coat, the two of them walked down Main Street. Tommy's throat felt choked with tears, and he could feel his cheeks burning red-hot and wet. His feet crunched through the snow. Wilbur took him all the way down to the end of the avenue and then continued on a hiking path that cleaved down the center of the woods. It led to a river, the lifeblood of Baileyville. Where the town bled from the cracks in its skin.

The riverbank was frozen over. Wilbur stopped at the clearing.

"Tommy," he murmured, "Look up." Tommy's face stung with tears, but he did.

Overhead, the sky was smeared with the most beautiful blue and white stars he had ever seen. They were slathered across endless rolls of dark ink. He could see the whole spiral of the Milky Way in a clear white stripe across the sky. The moon was a bright, beautiful silver coin suspended against the pitch-black horizon. Tommy exhaled quietly.

How he had never once bothered to truly look up at the stars in his whole time in Baileyville, Tommy did not know. But now he could not take his gaze away. There they were, miniature specks in a vast dark world. Floating through space amongst all the other specks. One part of the whole wide universe. It made him feel simultaneously dizzy and confused.

As if reading his mind, Wilbur said, "Big world. Little us."

"Right," Tommy managed. The tears were drying on his cheeks. "There's so much out there."

"You know, they're designing a telescope that's gonna be able to see for fifteen billion lightyears," Wilbur said. "It's going to see things that we never will in our lifetime."

"That's crazy."

"And all we have is this night sky."

"So what's the point?"



“I don’t know,” Wilbur said simply. “Maybe we’ve just got to deal with what we have. Maybe we can build a telescope to see beyond but we’re not scientists, none of us are, so we can’t. And maybe we’ve just got to look at the stars for a bit and think about whether it all matters or not.”

“But it does,” Tommy said. “It always matters.”

Wilbur nodded. “That’s why we’re here.”

They were both silent after that. The river was flowing beneath a frosty layer of ice. It was churning and pale blue. Tommy kept his gaze on the stars. It was cold enough that the tears could have frozen to his cheeks if they were still flowing. The sky was inky and black and the best thing about it all was that there were a million more stars than in any other place in the world. Everywhere else light pollution swallowed the natural sky. Here, it shone.

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Second Chances opened on January 3rd, 1984. Everything was still half-off, and as was customary with the New Year, they saw more customers than usual. There were people who walked through the doors and lost themselves in the winding, endless corridors that Tommy had never seen before. But they had seen him. Most of them knew him. One elderly woman, toothless and gummy, came up to him and mentioned the time that Tommy had walked past her home. He was sweet, she said, and a well-behaved young man. So professional. It made Tommy want to laugh. Out of all the words he would have used to describe himself, *well-behaved* and *professional* were not two of them.

She put her book on the counter, and Tommy rang her up, and he put the three dollars neatly inside the register. She smiled at him. Tommy felt himself smile back.

Techno was another person Tommy saw more of in the first few days. His New Year’s resolution, he told Tommy, was to finish the curriculum he had never done while at university. He had made it through one year as an English major before he moved to Baileyville, but had no diploma. Now he wanted to study all the topics he had intended to, but that he never had the opportunity to finish. He paced the winding veins and arteries of Second Chances whenever he had free time.

Tommy learned later that was how Techno had first met Wilbur. Wilbur told him the story one afternoon over mugs of hot cocoa. Night shifts were boring, and Techno had bought books he wanted to read during them. He was more quiet all those years ago, more shy. It had taken him nearly three months before he answered positively to Wilbur and held a decent conversation.

Now Techno was reading up on philosophy. He had three books with him when he arrived at the counter. Tommy rang him up and examined the cover. “*Radical Interpretation*,” he read. “Sounds lame.”

“Speak for yourself,” Techno said, and tucked the paperbacks in his bag to go.

The other good thing about the New Year, besides the fact that Second Chances was seeing more customers, was that everyone slowly trickled back to Baileyville from visiting family. Eret was the first, returning from Los Angeles, and after her came Fundy and Jack. Niki was the last to return from New York on the eighth of January. Her face was flushed from the cold when she pushed through the doors of the bookstore.

“This is for you,” she said, and placed a square envelope down on the table. It was gift wrapped with Tommy’s name on it. “Will’s upstairs, right?”

Tommy nodded. “He’s probably still asleep, if I’m being honest.”

Niki laughed. Tommy pulled at the ribbon and saw that she had gotten him a brand new vinyl of Al Stewart’s *Time Passages*. It had seen a recent uptick in plays on the radio and Tommy kept humming it under his breath. Now he could listen to it whenever he pleased.

Tommy thanked her for it before asking, “How was New York?”

Niki grinned. “It was wonderful. It’s all purple and neon there, you know. And it’s loud—they call it the city that never sleeps for a reason, because all throughout the night you hear the same rhythm of life over and over. I spent most of my time in Queens, but my parents and I did stay one night in Manhattan. If you ever get the chance to go, you should.”

“I’ll get around to it,” he said. “How was your family?”

Niki’s easy smile faded. “It’s been better,” she said. “But I trust that everything will work out eventually.”

“I’m sorry,” Tommy said. He knew Niki was a cheerful person. He knew that when her smile disappeared it did not often mean good things.

“It’s alright,” she said. “I’m glad to be back here. I missed everyone. You all are a much better family.” She grinned at him. “And you’re a much better little brother.”

Tommy flushed bright red. “I’m almost eighteen, you know.”

Niki nodded solemnly. “Of course. You’re almost grown up.” She turned down one of the branching off hallways, and Tommy followed. “Do you know where the foreign languages section is, by chance?”

Tommy knew Second Chances like the back of his hand. He could walk it blindfolded. He pointed Niki down a roundabout way to get there; three left turns, one right, up the staircase that went over the True Crime section, past the Adult Romance (a room Tommy was strictly forbidden from entering) and finally down another staircase to the foreign languages.

“Will and I are learning German together,” she said. “Is it in bad taste to buy him a book from his own business?”

“Nah,” Tommy said. “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

She flashed him a smile. “Good.” She pulled a book from the shelf— *Don Quixote* translated into German. Conversationally, she said, “I was born in Germany, you know.” Tommy blinked. He hadn’t known that, and when she spoke next, he thought that he might have placed her accent just a bit more. “I lived there until I was five or six until my parents moved to New York. It was awful, I have to say. I didn’t know anyone and I didn’t speak their language.” She laughed. “Oh, one time I remember at recess two boys wouldn’t let me get close to the playground. They threw big clumps of mud at me and ruined my cardigan and my skirt. I ran to the teacher and cried.”

“I’m sorry,” said Tommy, bemused as to why she was telling him.

“We ended up moving to Baileyville when I was nine,” she continued. “It’s a lot quieter here, but I ended up talking a lot more. My parents made me go to a speech tutor to get rid of the accent and so I could stop speaking that mess of combined English and German. It’s a bit disappointing to know that I can’t speak my mother tongue anymore. My first language. Sometimes it feels like I’m missing a piece of my culture. But Will has been offering to learn German with me. I think I’ll pick it up much faster than him.” She placed the book back on the shelf. “You could join us,” she offered.

Tommy snorted. “I don’t want to go back to school.”

“It’s not *school*. It’s a hobby. For fun.”

“Still good,” he said. “Besides, I already speak two languages.”

“Oh, yeah? What are they?”

“Yeah.” He puffed out his chest. “English and Tommy-ian. It’s my own language.”

She laughed so hard she almost doubled over. “Of course. Why would you need German when you’re genius enough to invent your own language?”

“Three languages is a bit much for anyone.”

“Yeah.” She looked at another book. It was a simple German to English dictionary for beginners. “Techno is trying to learn French this year. You could learn with him.”

Tommy’s lip curled. “French is somehow worse than German.”

“There’s lots of other languages,” she offered. “Not just French or German. Spanish. Italian. Latin. Maybe even Chinese if you’re feeling adventurous.”

Tommy thought about it. “Maybe. I don’t think I could learn it on my own.” He ducked his head, feeling unnecessarily embarrassed. “Everyone knows it. I can’t focus for shit. There’s no way I would be able to learn a language on my own.”

“Well, everyone’s making their New Year’s resolutions this month,” she said. “Now might be the time for a fresh start.”

A fresh start. There was something to be said about fresh starts. Tommy thought about it for a moment and found himself faced with the dawning possibility of changing things. He recalled the first real conversation that he and Wilbur had ever had, about dropping out of high school and how Tommy needed to do something with his life. He had hated it then. He had always hated hearing about how much potential he had; it reminded him of how he would never be able to live up to it.

As much as he had hated it, Tommy thought that he might like to finish high school. It had been dawning in him for a few weeks now, and the conversation with Wilbur earlier and now this conversation had secured it.

His voice was strange to his ears. “Do you think— well, could I enroll in the local school?”

She turned to him. Her eyes were bright and gleaming. “I could ask Puffy about it. She’s one of the teachers there. But yes. I think you could. And I really think you would enjoy it.”

“Right,” he said. His heart was beating quickly in his chest, hammering against the fingers of his ribs. He felt as if he were about to take a step in a crushing and beautiful direction. Above that, though, rested the embarrassment. He hated that it felt embarrassing to care about things. “Well, I guess that’s— it’s a resolution. A New Year’s resolution. It’s mine.”

She picked another book from the shelf. *Speaking German: A Book for The Beginner*. This one she tucked under her arm, and Tommy followed her back to the front desk.

“It’s a good resolution,” she said, when Tommy had rung her up and passed the book back to her. “Thank you for helping me pick out a book for Will.” Tommy felt that he hadn’t helped her much at all, but he offered a smile.

“I’ll see you later this week,” she said. “Take care!”

The door of Second Chances clasped shut behind her. Inside his chest, Tommy could feel a sheer, soft, luminescent film expanding. It was breathing and pulsing in time with his body. There was no other name for it but hope.

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On January ninth, there were exactly three months until he turned eighteen years old. That was only one quarter of a year until Tommy would take matters into his own hands. Against all odds he would drag Second Chances into life with him. It was January ninth; it was one of the coldest months of the year; it was a time for fresh starts. Tommy was both as young and as old as he’d ever been at the same time. He was convinced to make a change.

He did not talk to Wilbur about his plan to save Second Chances. In their scattered conversations that they had about the ten thousand dollars needed, Wilbur was insistent that it was not worth it. Tommy disagreed. He made his disagreement very clear; he did not tell Wilbur about his plans. But he did tell Wilbur hesitantly about enrolling in high school again.

Wilbur went silent for so long that he thought Wilbur was upset, and moved to apologize, but Wilbur had his back turned because he had teared up and didn't want Tommy to see.

*That's good*, he had said, voice all choked-up and watery. *That's really good*.

The world turned like usual. He woke up and made coffee. Tommy was beginning to enjoy the taste of it some more though he could hardly stand it without heaps of cream and sugar. He unlocked the doors to Second Chances, waited for the steady, slow trickle of customers. When Wilbur took over, Tommy walked down the spine of Main Street and let the sidewalks cradle his footsteps.

Techno returned with Phil to Second Chances that afternoon, as the sky began sinking into shades of orange and pink. Phil's jacket was coated in sawdust, and the two of them were arguing when they walked through the doors, but it was fond. They were putting up new shelves in the apartment. Apparently one of them had fallen. Tommy caught snatches of something to do with a head wound and a fallen hammer. Phil laughed so hard he almost choked.

"I got these for you," Wilbur interrupted when Techno approached. He reached underneath the front desk and dragged out an open cardboard box full of old paperback books. It thumped heavily onto the counter and Techno peered inside. He lifted the first book. *Twilight of the Idols*. Directly underneath, *Either/Or*.

"Philosophy is the most boring subject in the world," Techno said, but something in his eyes was gleaming like a freshly minted penny. "Did you empty out the whole back room for these or what?"

"Just found them lying around," said Wilbur, though he was obviously lying. Techno kept looking through the books. There were dozens.

"Thank you," he said eventually. "I'll put them to good use."

"You'd better. I'm expecting to read your dissertation any day now."

"Hah."

Wilbur pointed a finger at Phil. "You'd better hold him to it."

"I do," Phil reassured. "I'm about to start assigning him essays."

"You are all dreadful," Techno said. "You're practically trying to make me give up on this resolution." But he was smiling, reaching up to fix his glasses to hide the grin.

"We're heading to the Sail tonight, right?"

It was the first day that everyone was back: Wilbur and Tommy, Techno and Phil, Eret, Fundy, Niki, Jack. Apart from their group of eight, it was going to be a busy night. The Singing Sail was going to open for the first time in the new year, and the bar was sure to attract a crowd. No one cared that it was a Monday; Baileyville was pent up, and its occupants wanted their fix. Tommy was certain that almost the entire town would be at the

bar tonight. He wanted to be there too, even though it was going to be crowded and sweaty and suffocating, like the wet inside of a lung.

“Of course,” Phil answered. He sounded surprised that Wilbur had even bothered asking. “Everyone is going to be back.”

“We’ll head over,” Wilbur said. “Tommy, do you want to close up early?”

It had been a quiet day; it was always a quiet day. “Might as well.”

Wilbur tossed Tommy the keys. He went upstairs to change, and Techno hoisted himself up on the counter to submerge himself into Schopenhauer. Phil meandered through the close hallways, fingers skimming over the spines of books on the shelves. It was warm; the only sounds were the clink of keys between his fingers and the ruffle of paper. Enya crawled out from around a bookshelf and jumped onto the counter. Tommy scratched her beneath the chin, and she purred so strongly it shook her whole body.

At once Tommy was struck with the most extraordinary emotion. There was no name for it, but memories ran through his mind like a roll of film, so fast he could hardly breathe. He saw his reflection in the window of a bus like a ghost against the night sky, and he saw The Singing Sail and its billiards table and the first game of darts Tommy had ever played. The man who made his sandwiches at the deli and grinned with one tooth missing when he passed it to Tommy, snow falling thick on oak trees, freshly made coffee and eggnog clutched between cold hands, reading books curled up in the old bathtub with all the pillows in it, fingering the dried slips of leaves and flowers that sometimes fell from between the pages of ancient books. Enya, Wilbur’s smudged glasses, the puckered scar on his arm, the door to Second Chances.

Tommy had painted his life in broad strokes here. Here in Baileyville he was a friend. He could sit at the bar at the Sail and talk with Niki and Jack until his cheeks hurt from smiling. He could go to Fundy and Eret’s place when Techno or Wilbur were willing to drive him there and watch football games with the volume turned all the way up. He had Niki’s place to help her garden the flowers he had once torn, to Techno and Phil’s place, where he had first felt at home.

More than all the people within, though, he belonged to Baileyville. To the muddy, soft hiking paths surrounding the town, coated with wet mulch and damp leaves. To the flowing rivers that were the town’s lifeblood and cracks into its soul. To the snow that fell softly from the sky in large white clumps, sticking itself to his hands and eyelashes and hair. To the trees, half-pine, half-deciduous, that formed bristling, green fingers in the sky overhead. To the sidewalks and the shops and to the small town that breathed with every step he took.

Things were not solved. Second Chances still needed ten thousand dollars to survive. And even if Tommy took out the loan in three months and helped it survive, Baileyville was a dying town around it, dissolving before his very eyes. Phil was going to move, and when Techno and Wilbur learned how to disentangle themselves, Techno would likely follow. Wilbur would seek out the next and greatest opportunity to keep himself living a good life. Their family would splinter, but it would heal. Tommy had survived worse things. He knew deep with certainty that he had planted roots. Just the way Techno had, just the way Phil had,

just the way Wilbur had. And while they would transplant them, Tommy was finally content to stay.

The night sank lower in shades of black. When Wilbur rushed back downstairs, Techno hoisted the box into his arms and huffed at the weight. Phil offered to help, but Techno insisted he could do it on his own. Tommy ushered Wilbur out after him and turned to lock up the front door.

As he stepped out onto the street, he could have seen any number of things. He could have seen the wide door of Second Chances swing shut behind the four of them, or the potted geraniums that had managed to survive the bitter wind chill all the way through January. He could have seen the string lights coating all of Main Street like a glowing web, or the way his boots pressed through the soft, fresh powder. He could have seen the cars lined up along Main Street, the townspeople clutching cups of hot cocoa and coffee to their chests, the pink and blue and black mittens and scarves flapping in the wind, the brown and black winter coats.

He could have seen Wilbur, beanie pulled low, hair damp and curled from the melting snow. Techno, glasses slipping low on his nose, hands pink from the cold and white from the weight of the books he planned to read. Phil, walking behind the two of them, ears pink, smiling at whatever ridiculous joke Techno had cracked. He could have seen a peculiar, gossamer sensation pulling all four of them together in a soft, dreamlike hand—a hand that belonged to no one, but cupped all four together.

He could have seen a still life of the world he wanted to live in forever. But he did not.

Instead he cast his gaze towards the black sky, towards the Milky Way and her stars—one bright, luminescent, purple-pink-white stripe of hope, blazing through the sky overhead.

## End Notes

if you enjoyed, please leave kudos/comments! i'm also in the process of making some adjustments to my writing style, so i'd appreciate any feedback <3

i have a few other stories from my fiction class that i might end up converting into fic (we had a unit on magical realism and another on character motivation, and i really liked what i came up with for those) so hopefully i'll have more fics out soon (though definitely none as long as this one!)

baileyville, maine is a real place, so hopefully i did it justice. happy holidays and thank you for reading <3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!